SCRUTINY

REISSUED IN 20 VOLUMES
WITH AN INDEX AND
RETROSPECT

VOLUME XIII
1945–46

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

XIII

1945–46

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1963

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PUBLISHED BY
THE SYNDICS OF THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bentley House, 200 Euston Road, London, N.W.1
American Branch: 32 East 57th Street, New York 22, N.Y.
West African Office: P.O. Box 33, Ibadan, Nigeria

First issued quarterly at Cambridge 1932–53
Reissued in 20 *volumes, with index* 1963

Printed in the United States of America

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vol. XIII. No. 1. SPRING, 1945.

SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

Edited by

D. W. HARDING F. R. LEAVIS
L. C. KNIGHTS W. H. MELLERS

CONTENTS

Page

THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY, by *A. J. Woolford* 2

GOETHE'S 'FAUST' AND THE WRITTEN WORD, by *D. J. Enright*
(I) The First Part 11

ON THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY, by *L. C. Knights* 37

'THOUGHT' AND EMOTIONAL QUALITY:
Notes in the Analysis of Poetry, by *F. R. Leavis* 53

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS 72

HAIL BUTLER!, *Willingly to School,* reviewed by Denys Thompson (p. 72). SOCIOLOGY AND LITERATURE, *The Sociology of Literary Taste* and *English Social History,* reviewed by F. R. Leavis (p. 74).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY[1]

THE two books named below are the work of one who is eminent in his profession and it is interesting to consider the change in point of view which comparison reveals. The first part of this essay consists of a synopsis of the respective arguments and the second of a critical commentary.

I. SYNOPSES.

(*a*) *The Whig Interpretation of History.*

This work was a strong essay in debunking. It set itself to examine the attitude to their subject of a 'school' of historians, to enumerate the defects of their method and to make logical conclusions as to what the historian should do. Mr. Butterfield, as he then was, started by defining what he called the 'whig' approach as 'the tendency . . . to write on the side of the Protestants and the Whigs . . . and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present'. He was to be concerned with 'the relations between historical research and what is known as 'general history' . . . and also concerning the limits of history as a study, and particularly the attempt of the whig writers to gain from it a finality that it cannot give'. In the Introduction he dealt cynically with the 'top-hat and the pontifical manner' which was apt to condemn because it misunderstood and with the artificial division by the whig historian of men of the past into the friends and enemies of progress. He deplored the slowness with which the results of modern research were incorporated into the broad outline of general history and dealt trenchantly with the problem of abridgement and the whiggish temptations to which it is almost bound to give rise.

He commenced his demonstration of the inefficacy of the whig method of approach by a consideration of the 'underlying assumption'. That of the whig was the elucidation of close resemblances between the past and the present, whereas it ought to be that of the differences, presumbably since it is on distinction and not resemblance that definition is based. The danger of the whig theory was an over-simplification of the process of history, such as that which is implicit in the statement that 'Martin Luther was the father of modern freedom'. This was shown to be the incorrect answer to a question which it was improper to ask. The historian ought to say,

[1] *The Whig Interpretation of History*: H. Butterfield (Bell, 1931). *The Englishman and his History*: Professor H. Butterfield (Cambridge University Press, 1944).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not 'to whom do we owe our freedom?' but 'by what processes did freedom arrive?'. If the right question were asked, the past would be studied for its own sake and from such study would emerge the conclusion that the whole of the past produced the whole of the present, with the rider that the unravelling of the problem of 'responsibility' was an impossible task. The over-riding necessity was for research and yet more research and it had to be borne in mind that such research must tend to be lost in any abridgement. As it was, the abridgers par excellence, the Whigs, had a convenient 'rule-of-thumb' which gave them 'an excuse for leaving things out' but left them with 'a gigantic optical illusion', with a series of abstracts from contexts which had the unfortunate results of denying understanding where it was most needed and of stopping inquiry.

Dealing with the 'Historical Process', Mr. Butterfield again referred to the Reformation and to the part played therein by Luther as a means of illustrating the over-dramatisation which results from the whig fallacy. What ultimately emerged as modern freedom was due, not to the fact that the good Protestants fought for it against the bad Catholics but as the result of the clash of two parties, each contending for absolute dominion over the minds of the other, and the result as we know it would not have been palatable to either. In further amplification of this point, the author spoke of the whig historian as being 'apt to imagine the British Constitution as coming down to us by virtue of the work of long generations of whigs and in spite of the obstructions of a long line of tyrants and tories', whereas 'in reality it is the result of the continual interplay and perpetual collision between the two'. The metaphor by which the more correct view of the process is illustrated was that of the network in contradistinction to that of the line and it was asserted that history 'is not the study of origins but the analysis of all the mediations by which the past was turned into our present'. In it the only absolute is that of change and the only subject for the historian to study is that of transition: whiggery is self-stultifying in that 'it sends us back to where we began and ratifies our preconceptions'.

Behind the whig fallacy lies the desire to arrive at 'judgments of value', at general propositions, whereas the true function of the historian is to 'watch change and complication for their own sake'. It is concerned with the concrete and 'is a form of descriptive writing like travel books'. There is 'no essence that can be got by evaporating human and personal factors'. 'The whole process of historical study'—and this is the crux of the argument of the book—'is a movement towards historical research'. The thesis is illustrated by a consideration of the evolution of toleration which is seen, through the actions of Queen Elizabeth and of Catherine de' Medici 'to have begun as a political necessity', not desired for its own sake as a point of principle, 'and to have become a state ideal'. It was 'a heritage of disaster', of the slow discovery of the impossibility of mutual extermination, which 'provoked a creative act'.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lest it should appear that the objectivity of the historian and his activity are uncreative, Mr. Butterfield points out that the art of the historian is that of the mediator between present and past and that for this task he requires creative imagination, insight and sympathy. His impartiality is not indifference and his true fervour is love of the past for the sake of the past. The whig falls into the annoying and foolish error of being wise after the event, of leaving out what is inconvenient on a selective principle which can only produce propaganda (with its unpleasant modern connotation). Not that the historian may not abridge: to do so is precisely his task but he must not change the meaning in the process. Nor is he forbidden to have his personal opinions and preferences—but his bias should be avowed and therefore discountable.

Finally, the historian is not entitled to make moral judgments. He may neither exonerate nor condemn and being primarily a descriptive writer, does not move in the world of moral judgments, 'the most useless and unproductive of all forms of reflection'. History is 'all things to all men . . . an old reprobate . . . a harlot . . . who best serves those who suspect her most'.

(*b*) *The Englishman and His History:* 1944.

Professor Butterfield again devotes his introduction to the *raison-d'être* of his book. In 1940, he says, we resumed contact with our traditions and were again fortunate in drawing strength from the continuity of our history, a continuity that has been reconciled with change. The whig interpretation which was 'never more vivid than in the great speeches of 1940', has played a role in English politics and progress, 'in the acquisition of our liberties'. The Whigs—though not the whig historians—'evolved an attitude to the historical process, a way of co-operating with the forces of history, an alliance with providence'. 'When we speak of England's contribution to the art of politics and the machinery of government, we do not always remember how much they are the gift of the whigs'.

Dealing more particularly with the whig interpretation he says that it was 'not the invention of a wilful historian but part of the landscape' and that 'they must take heed who court controversy with the remaining diluted remnants' of it. 'The theme of English political history is the story of our liberty', and 'the misguided austerity of youth', abandoning the whig approach, 'opens the door to seven devils worse than the first'. We are, in fact, 'to celebrate' the whig interpretation 'with robust but regulated pride'. It was this interpretation which enabled us to 'make peace with the middle ages' by misconstruing them, a very different action from that of the French who disowned their past in 1789, and, having done so, had to appeal to abstract rights to fill up the resulting vacuum. We had our period of absolutism under the Tudors, during which time our notion of historic rights was lost, but this was a good thing because the centring of all loyalty on the monarch ended the feudal epoch and gave rise to the political significance

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the middle class and the realization of 'the idea of the state'. During that period the writing of history, released from the vested incompetence of the monkish chroniclers, set itself to the glorification of the Lancastrians and Tudors and the celebration of the Reformation. It glorified King John and made no mention of Magna Carta until the end of the sixteenth century, except in such way as to betray complete ignorance of the contents of the document. It was not until 1572 that historical research was deliberately undertaken and then it was more a 'hunt for precedents with deliberate perversion and misunderstanding' than a distinterested search after truth or a study of the past for the sake of the past. The suspension of the Society of Antiquaries in 1604 at the behest of James I makes it apparent that the lawyers were concerned to find anti-monarchial precedents and by 1620 an anti-monarchial clique, of which Coke, Selden, Eliot, Pym and Wentworth were the leaders, had been formed.

The clique was intended to establish several points of first-rate current interest and importance, the first of which was the question of the antiquity of the House of Commons. The attack of Charles I on the authority and privileges of the House and his opposition to attempts to expand them, led to attempts to prove that it dated from time immemorial and that to attack it was to innovate. A second question was that of the common-law, which became related with the first through the person of Sir Edward Coke who also found himself in opposition to the encroachments of the Royal prerogative. In his search for suitable precedents, Coke was quite unscrupulous and in nothing more so than in his resuscitation and re-interpretation of Magna Carta. This affirmation of feudal law he deliberately misconstrued into an affirmation of common- and therefore anti-monarchial-law in the case of the Five Knights, the outcome of which was the Petition of Right. Thus did the whig interpretation do service in the winning by Parliament of the seventeenth century constitutional struggle, by overlooking the Tudors and harking back to the letter, if not the spirit, of the Middle Ages.

Ever since, the whig interpretation has been subjected to the revision of the research worker, but 'in every Englishman there is hidden something of the whig that seems to tug at the heart-strings. The Restoration of 1660 recovered the continuity of English History after the gash of the civil war and the Revolution of 1688 was the triumph of the whigs in that 'they made their conception of Magna Carta come true'. Their desire to return to the perfection of a mythical past had to be changed in order to incorporate the idea of Progress, but with this change the whig interpretation has survived to fill its function in the days of 1940, when it was discovered 'to what a degree the British Empire had become an organization for the purpose of liberty'.

The whig tradition has asserted itself in the English gift for compromise, which is 'an acquired habit', 'the result of ripe experience', 'the fruit of deliberate reflection on the past'. Hence the *laissez-faire* policy followed in Canada in the nineteenth century,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the moderation of the Exclusion Bill controversy, the emergence of the 'trimmers' and the unviolent course of the Revolution of 1688. Hence the deliberate policy of hastening slowly, the distrust of sweeping theories, the ability to co-operate with Providence. Hence the reward in the non-generation of irreconcilable hatreds within the state and the favourable comparison with the achievements of the continental states with their antithesis between Tradition and Reason or their Marxist fatalism on the subject of revolution. The prime political result of the French Revolution was 'the organization of the state for the sole purpose of waging war and the dictatorship based on plebiscite'. Mazzini's idealism paved the way for the Fascist victory in Italy. On the other hand the English whigs reconciled the past with the present and thereby obviated resort to violence and the sacrifice of present generations for remote and hypothetical utopias.

They were similarly virtuous in not breaking with the Christian traditions as, for instance, did the French in the Age of Reason when 'the method of the scientific revolution was applied to the non-material sciences'. Secularization on the continent meant the transference of faith to the political field, which led to over-optimism as to the possibilities of political action and cut at the root of the principle of compromise. Christianity has prevented Englishmen from making gods out of worldly things, from considering men as means to an end rather than as an end in themselves. They have remained individualists because individualism is rooted in the tradition and sentiment of England and the economic expression of it, capitalism, with all its disadvantages, 'saved us from something worse. Thus have the whigs served England and for it must they be praised. And what we praise we should imitate.

II. Analysis.

From the above abridgements—abridgements which have not changed the meaning—it is obvious that Professor Butterfield has changed his mind about the interpretation of history. He has not merely written a new book and in it presented a new point of view: he has deliberately and scornfully rejected his earlier thesis, going so far as to say 'they must tread warily who court controversy with the remaining diluted remnants of the whig interpretation of history'. He stigmatizes such efforts as products of 'the misguided austerity of youth', condemns them as 'opening the door to seven devils worse than the first' and then turns to celebrate what he formerly condemned as unhistorical and of dubious honesty 'with robust but regulated pride'. No change could have been more complete and it deserves close study.

The Whig Interpretation of History was the work of an idealist who was concerned with a disinterested search after truth. Having read carefully the works of earlier generations of historians, he set himself to discover what preconceptions and prejudices underlay their pronouncements and by what types of error they were attended. It is not unlikely that he approached the subject with a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

consciousness of the 'superior' objectivity of the scientist, who approaches his problems with a completely unbiassed mind and is led to his impersonal conclusions only after a process of weighing and measuring. This attempt to introduce into the humanities the detachment of the laboratory was admirable in its corrective intent. The idea that it is possible for anyone with a knowledge of the past, scanty or even profound, to pontificate on historical events and to find in such 'study' a justification for whatever prejudice happens to be held is obviously dangerous. History and politics have a habit of merging and the writing of history around a political conception carries with it all the danger of propaganda in its modern derogatory sense. The fact that the Bible has lent itself to progressive reinterpretation has not been an unmixed blessing for the Christian religion and the work of the Marxists and Fascists on the similar Book of History has caused bloodshed. In combating tendencies of this sort, Mr. Butterfield performed a worthy service: he was the student *par excellence* and if his academicism might seem to be sterile, at least it was not dangerous.

The danger of the imputation of sterility as the result of cultivating his new inhibitions led him to stress virtues in the subject other than those of final judgments on the past and 'lessons of the past' to be applied to the future. If we may not see in the past a slow but steady convergence towards the perfection of the present through the victorious struggles of the whites against the blacks, if we may not use current conceptions as a yardstick for measuring the principles and actions of the past, at least we shall have to use our imagination in a creative fashion and we shall, further, appreciate the very difficulties in the process of evolutionary progress. We shall become more humble in the estimate of our achievement and still learn the valuable lesson that utopias are not just around the corner. Mr. Butterfield was unafraid to face the logical but seemingly discouraging conclusion that the art of the historian accordingly dwindles to that of pure narration and that it must ever be preoccupied with more and more concrete detail. 'All historical study is a progress towards historical research' was his uncompromising verdict. In truth, all simplification of historical process is false and Mr. Butterfield's metaphor of the network is *ipso facto* superior to that of the line. The chief example taken, that of Luther as the Father of Modern Freedom, was unexceptionable. Toleration emerged as the result of a clash between contending claims for omnicompetence and was a result desired in the first place by neither party. Mr. Butterfield saw history as an inchoate patternless affair, an endless improvisation.

His admiration for the scientist was not confined to the technique of the laboratory: it paid court also to the type of explanation, abstract and unemotional, which the scientist produces. The historical process was something self-existent, above the impulses and aspirations of men and frequently at cross-purposes with them, the resultant, as it were, of a vast and complicated polygon of forces. In this complex, the importance of the individual was minimized,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so much, perhaps, that history tended to become bowdlerised, as though it were indeed impossible to evaporate the human element and leave some historical quintessence behind. This was a fallacy the author himself condemned as whiggish in another context. For the Luthers, the Calvins, the Napoleons of this world he substituted 'conjunctions', 'meditations' and 'juxtapositions', as though to get away from humanity were to approach nearer to truth. The consequent difficulty of accounting for the process of events that were not controlled by men he met by the postulation of a 'providence', vague and undefined except that it was not apparently theistic in character. It would not be relevant here to discuss the rival merits of the biographical as opposed to more abstract philosophies of history: sufficient to note that the 'explanation', which according to Basil Willey in *The Seventeenth Century Background* is 'a statement which satisfies the demands of a particular time or place', was sufficiently unsatisfying to merit further treatment in a later work.

Several remarks indicate that the author was dissatisfied with his own conclusions. After being uncompromising on the subject of abridgement which he regarded as essentially falsifying he admitted that it was indeed the task of the historian and that it might be possible to perform the task without changing the meaning in the process. The results of historical research might be incorporated in the general text-books and ultimately cause a revision of the general theme of written history. Even the bias of the historian might be mentioned, provided only that it was explicit and avowed. But the self-denying ordinance was reasonably and, it is suggested, properly complete. The last words, that history 'is all things to all men . . . an old reprobate . . . a harlot' 'who best serves those who suspect her most' were admirably chosen.

The greater part of the second book is concerned with a piece of descriptive writing on the subject of the evolution of the whig attitude to politics and history and in so far as this is adequately done, no adverse comment is justifiable. The story of the mediations by which the Tudor attitude to history became that of a school which even to-day has a following, fulfils precisely the function of the historian as defined in the earlier book and there is not the ground for complaint that in the process of the abridgement the meaning has been changed. At the same time it is clear as to where the author's sympathies lie and those sympathies have over-ridden impartiality in several places . . . It is one thing to demonstrate in what ways Sir Edward Coke was unscrupulous in his 'discovery' of anti-monarchial precedents: it is another to praise his actions, in spite of their dishonesty by the standards of this or of any other century, because the results remain palatable to a country whose political system is a constitutional monarchy. It is one thing to point out the contrasting attitudes to tradition of England and France as evidenced by their respective revolutions in 1688 and 1789 and another to ascribe the whole of their subsequent developments, the one praiseworthy, the other not, to this difference in attitude. To

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

select a theme of history, as for instance the 'theme of English political history' as 'the story of our liberty', to find evidence in support of it even if it involves explaining away the Tudor despotism as an indispensable if involuntary contribution towards it, is to commit those very whig errors of viewing the past with the eyes of the present, and of using a tendentious principle of selection in the process of abridgement, against which the author so powerfully inveighed in 1931.

It is one thing to plead that each generation must rewrite history in its own idiom—as Jowett holds that each generation must re-translate its Plato. It is another to produce a new version of the history at each rewriting, particularly if it is framed with reference to the contemporary scene. Had England fallen to Germany in 1940 our history books would have received drastic revision and King John might once again have come into favour. More likely would have been the representation of our parliamentary history as a regrettable limitation of the power of the state, making for inefficiency, corruption and decay. The new version would have been resented, as it would equally be if a conversion to communism produced a wholesale revaluation of the past in terms of the Party Line. What the Whigs seek to do is similar in degree if not in kind, whereas the aim of the historian should be to produce such a version as will stand as long as new facts do not come to be known. Such work could only come from men conscious, as far as possible, of their prejudices and determined to exclude them. The alternative can only be anachronistic, no whit more sensible than an expression of regret that Harold the Saxon did not use a Bren gun at the Battle of Hastings. It is in the exercise of such an abstinence that the virtue of history as a discipline exists. The fact that it is impossible of achievement should constitute no bar to the making of the effort.

Over-simplification is not the worst fault of *The Englishman and his History*. Even if it were justifiable to falsify by sentimentalization the course of events in the past, it is worse than unhistorical to plead for a continuance of the 'methods' of the 'whigs' in the future. Those methods, a determination to hasten slowly, to postpone change until such time as it is generally palatable are those of an existing political party. When they are preached as being those which the verdict of history favours, the historian has degenerated into the political propagandist: the conflict of the Whites with Blacks has changed into that of the Blues with the Reds. Professor Butterfield only thinly disguises his hostility to the doctrine of another political party. Capitalism with its admitted evils is the working in the economic sphere of that principle of individualism so cherished by the Englishman—but 'it probably saved us from something very much worse'.

'The top hat and the pontifical manner' is further evident in the comparisons made between our achievements and those of France. The question is asked whether, with all their revolutionary fervour and worship of reason the continental states have advanced

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as far as we ourselves have. When it is recalled that the inspiration of the book was the story of 1940 and that the contrast between our position and that, in particular, of France, was nationally gratifying, the lapse into self-congratulation is seen to be regrettable. There is no mention of geographically favourable factors. Nor is there any admission of the magnitude of the achievement of Soviet Russia in the short space of twenty-five years, an achievement in which respect for tradition was non-existent. And to couple individualism, particularly in the economic sense, with conscious adherence to the Christian tradition leaves a great deal unsaid.

For just as Sir Edward Coke selected from the legal history of the past such precedents as advanced the claims of the House of Commons, just as the political hotheads of 1789 selected from the works of the *philosophes* such doctrines as justified their lusting after power, so is it feasible that only such parts of the Christian ethic as did not explicitly condemn child-labour in factories or the passage of laws to keep up the price of bread, were 'adopted' by the politicians, whig or otherwise, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The assumption that men are dominated by ideas rather than that ideas are dominated and utilized by men for the furtherance of their own interests is at least questionable. Professor Butterfield has not advanced his interpretation of the verdict of history as one of the many possible. He has, on the contrary, written it himself without avowal of bias and with a refusal to mention such facts as are inconvenient to his theory. The transition from the eighteenth-century squirearchy to the industrial feudalism of the nineteenth was by no means smooth, accompanied as it was by unparalleled social dislocation, nor was the transference of political power from the landed aristocracy to the middle-class accomplished by anything less than the threat of civil war. To give way at the point of the pistol may be worldly wise but is hardly virtuous and in any case it is arguable that civil war was averted more by the Methodist Revival, with its doctrine of acceptance of the earthly lot, than by any willingness to compromise by either Whigs or Tories. The Manchester Massacre, the Chartist Movement, the anti-trade-union legislation, the General Strike are all events which must be taken into account before nationally gratifying generalizations are framed. The catastrophic nature of the French Revolution can be as much over-stressed as the continuity of the revolution of 1688: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* is by no means a British monopoly. To make a conscious virtue of the indifference which allowed Canada to develop her constitutional independence in the nineteenth century is to claim an unwarranted highmindedness on the part of contemporary statesmen. 'These colonies are a mill-stone round our necks' and if there was some reflection on the moral of the revolt of the American Colonies, there was also exploitation of the fact that in a free-trade world in which England had a mercantile and industrial lead, colonies were largely superfluous. As for the realization in 1940 that the British Empire was an organization for the pursuit of liberty, as a famous

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

contemporary would point, it all depends what you mean by 'liberty'. More recent pronouncements on the subject of colonies seem to betray an element of guilty conscience. Finally, the ability of the Englishman to co-operate with 'providence' is an inference which raises more problems than it solves.

It is not suggested that the various views put forward in this essay in opposition to those of Professor Butterfield are any more worthy of acceptance than are his but the fact that they are indeed tenable is urged. The conclusion that the work of 1944 is retrogressive is inescapable. The disinterested search after truth has yielded to the writing of history on a patriotic and nationalistic impulse. No one will deny that the achievement of 1940 was worthy of celebration, but no one will be blind to the fact that the mystic emotionalism engendered at Dunkirk was likely to endanger that objectivity which the historian must regard as his ideal. Falsification of history, as one of the factors which favoured the rise of Hitler and Mussolini to power, is precisely one of the things against which we are fighting. The inherent superiority of the Englishman has as little to recommend it, *sub specie aeternitatis,* as the German doctrine of race-superiority.

The historian should indeed follow the precepts of 1931, dwelling on the detail, the complexity, eschewing the sweeping generalization and the moral judgment. He should be conscious of the limitations of his study and pass to the consideration of philosophic or current political problems with a full recognition of the transition and a due humility. Only by so doing can he further the real interests of his humanistic service: only by so doing can he retain the respect with which he is regarded by the community of learning. The hall-mark of the learned man is his willingness to admit to ultimate ignorance.

A. J. WOOLFORD.

GOETHE'S 'FAUST' AND THE WRITTEN WORD

(I) *THE FIRST PART*

> 'He alone is worthy of respect who knows what is of use to himself and others, and who labours to control his self-will. Each man has his own fortune in his hands, as the artist has a piece of raw material which he is to fashion to a certain shape. But the art of living rightly is like all arts: only the capacity is born with us; it must be learned and practised with incessant care'.
>
> —(*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUCH disrepute, oblivion even, has fallen to its lot these last years that one cannot take for granted the presence of a body of knowledge about Goethe's once-famous drama, *Faust;* hence the tactics of Wilson Knight, for instance, are unfortunately denied to the critic or interpreter of this work, and so I may perhaps be excused a somewhat elementary approach and an exacting amount of simple explanatory comment. Faced with this necessity of starting from scratch, I have found it advantageous to go straight through the play, making whatever point seems called for as I reach it, rather than to lose sight, in the confusion of dealing with each aspect separately, of the remarkably smooth and cogent way in which the higher, subtler issues of the *First Part* are geared to the conventional incidents of the Faust legend. I have given an approximate prose translation of quotations wherever necessary.

* * * *

THE PROLOGUE IN HEAVEN.

The Prelude on the Stage is an unimportant exercise; this, on the other hand, is of prime importance. It is the beginning of the play proper, it suggests the middle, and it states the end. In three lovely songs, the Archangels describe with attractive conciseness the glories of the created world; in tone they bear a close resemblance to several of Rilke's specifically religious poems (notably *Gebete der Mädchen zu Marie* and *Verkündigung*):

> Und Stürme brausen um die Wette,
> Vom Meer aufs Land, vom Land aufs Meer,
> Und bilden wüthend eine Kette
> Der tiefsten Wirkung rings umher.
> Da flammt ein blitzendes Verheeren
> Dem Pfade vor des Donnerschlags;
> Doch deine Boten, Herr, verehren
> Das sanfte Wandeln deines Tags.

The rhythm is one refreshingly unlike the Miltonic march-on-velvet which in the past has been predominantly popular with poets essaying a similar subject: it is a steady, confident praise of creation with, always implicit, a hint of personal humility, an awareness of 'not unto us the glory'. This is a point well worth making, right at the start: not only because of the chance it gives me to refer to Rilke (no doubt some part of the recent renewed interest in the Metaphysicals was due to Eliot's literary antecedents—and the current idea of Goethe as a kind of heavy Great Victorian is due solely to the spate of later nineteenth-century translators, themselves rather small Victorians), but also because the first speech of Mephistopheles, which occurs directly after the Archangels' impressive pæan, is such a striking and significant contrast. But do not look for this contrast in any of the available English translations.[1] For when Mephistopheles begins to speak, the translators at once heave a sigh of relief, drop the high-faluting tone they used for the Arch-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

angels, and fill Mephisto's mouth with all manner of 'good lack!' and 'marry' as if he were a fifth-rate Shakespearean rustic. There is nothing of this in the original; certainly Mephisto does not speak in the elevated measures of the Archangels, but neither is he so devilishly jocular.

His speech begins in a familiar, equal-to-equal, manner, but it becomes a moving indictment, not so much of mankind as of their creator; it is a reply to the Archangels—*they* mention only the awe-inspiring wonders of Nature, but Mephistopheles deplores the fact that he cannot regard mankind in the same rosy light, *he* is concerned with the debit side of creation:

> Von Sonn' und Welten weiss ich nichts zu sagen,
> Ich sehe nur, wie sich die Menschen plagen.
> Der kleine Gott der Welt bleibt stets von gleichem Schlag
> Und ist so wunderlich als wie am ersten Tag.
> Ein wenig besser würd' er leben,
> Hättst du ihm nicht den Schein des Himmelslichts gegeben;
> Er nennt's Vernunft und braucht's allein,
> Nur thierischer als jedes Thier zu sein.
> Er scheint mir, mit Verlaub von Euer Gnaden,
> Wie eine der langbeinigen Zikaden,
> Die immer fliegt und fliegend springt
> Und gleich im Gras ihr altes Liedchen singt.
> Und läg' er nur noch immer in dem Grase!
> In jeden Quark begräbt er seine Nase.
>
> (I have nothing to say about suns and worlds; I only see how men torment themselves. This little god of earth remains true to type, as strange as on the first day. He'd have managed a little better if you had not allowed him a glimmer of divine light—he calls it Reason and uses it only to be beastlier than any beast. He seems to me, if your grace will permit, like one of those long-legged grasshoppers, always flying and springing into the air and then singing their old song in the grass. If he would only stay there in the grass! But no, he must bury his nose in every mess).

'Singing their old song in the grass' is an ironic retort to the first line of the *Prologue,* 'Die Sonne tönt nach alter Weise' (the sun makes music in its ancient fashion).

The Lord answers Mephisto's criticism of his ability as creator by drawing his attention to Faust, 'my servant', whom Mephistopheles depicts as a kind of romantic hero,

---

[1]One may except the (American) 'New Directions' translation of the *First Part* from these strictures. It is certainly the most readable English version extant, but its greatest virtue is the negative one of avoiding the turgidity of the earlier translations and it is occasionally ridiculous in its attempt to be contemporary.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fürwahr! er dient euch auf besondre Weise.
Nich irdisch ist des Thoren Trank noch Speise.
Ihn treibt die Gährung in die Ferne,
Er ist sich seiner Tollheit halb bewusst:
Von Himmel fordert er die schönsten Sterne
Und von der Erde jede höchste Lust,
Und alle Näh' und alle Ferne
Befriedigt nicht die tiefbewegte Brust

(Indeed! he serves you in an odd manner. The fool's food and drink are not of this world. An inner fermentation drives him on, half-conscious of his madness—from Heaven he demands its loveliest stars and from the earth its highest joys, and neither near nor far can appease his agitated breast).

But the Lord replies,

Wenn er mir jetzt auch nur verworren dient,
So werd' ich ihn bald in die Klarheit führen.
Weiss doch der Gärtner, wenn das Bäumchen grünt,
Dass Blüth' und Frucht die künft'gen Jahre zieren

(Though at present his service is confused, soon I shall lead him into clarity. The gardener knows, when the young tree shows green, that blossom and fruit will grace the future years)

and this is a statement of his policy towards mankind in general. Mephistopheles, however, remains unconvinced, reasoning that since man is a hybrid creature, between the angel and the ape, he cannot lead the pure single-minded life as it is conceived in Heaven—and he must therefore endure a painful perverted form of animal existence. Mephisto wagers, however, that he will be able to turn Faust into the path of absolute evil if the Lord will give him a free hand. With the famous line, 'Es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt' (as long as he strives, man must err), the Lord grants him permission to do his worst without divine intervention:

Nun gut, es sei dir überlassen!
Zieh diesen Geist von seinem Urquell ab
Und führ ihn, kannst du ihn erfassen,
Auf deinem Wege mit herab,
Und steh beschämt, wenn du bekennen musst:
Ein guter Mensch in seinem dunkeln Drange
Ist sich des rechten Weges wohl bewusst

(Enough, it is in your hands! Divert this spirit from its fountainhead and, if you can grasp it, lure it along your downward path; and stand in shame when you are forced to confess: a good man, in his dim urgency, is still conscious of the right way).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One observes that this is spoken less in the manner of a wager than in the terms of a statement. The action of the whole play is summed up in this passage as in a kind of précis: Faust *will* be 'lured along the downward path', he *will* be 'still conscious of the right way'. The pre-determined character of the play, thus announced at its very inception—and strengthened by the Lord's explicit, and confident, reference to Mephistopheles as a spur to slothful man, a 'creator' of a kind, even—may at first seem rather discouraging to modern readers, perhaps may appear as blasphemous, in a different way, as it would seem to the right-minded Lutherans who edited Faust-books with the intention of scaring their readers off the unholy zeal for secret knowledge.

And, in passing, it may be interesting to glance at the history of the Faust legend, an index to the history of literature and thought itself. The first book to deal at length with the subject was published in Frankfurt-on-Main in 1587, 'Historia of Dr. Johann Fausten, the widely-known Magician and Master of the Black Art, how he sold himself to the Devil for an appointed time . . . an appalling example, abominable instance, and well-meaning warning to all presumptuous, curious, and Godless Men. James IV. Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you'. During the next century the story was reprinted and abridged a number of times, usually with the same moral appendage ('A Christian Believer' published an abridgement in 1728), and there were also a number of Faust-dramas (the most famous, of course, being Marlowe's *Tragical History*) and puppet plays on the same theme. A certain amount of sympathy for Faust was displayed in these early writings: Marlowe's play, for instance, and the Augsburg puppet play ('I became a philosopher, desiring to know the soul of man, to catch truth by the wings, and wisdom by the forelock—and I found shadows, vapours, follies, bound into a system'). But in general their official tendency, at least, was that of orthodox repudiation and pious horror, whereas in the *Sturm und Drang* period of the middle-eighteenth century the legend became invested with a new and very different significance. Lessing himself planned a drama, of which only one scene was completed: the interesting point is that Faust was to emerge as a Romantic Hero, not a sinful, over-curious reprobate, and so Lessing was faced with the necessity of finding a way of escape from hell-fire for the Promethean figure of his hero, the 'Renaissance Mensch', the seeker after truth and knowledge. It has been estimated that about thirty plays or poems dealing with Faust were written in Germany at this time (Scherer mentions an ambitious drama in which Faust and Don Juan were brought into collision as rivals in love) and Faust's fate was variable; the play by Count Soden (1797) seems to be typical of the age: Faust is the underground movement of his time, enemy of tyrants, lover of his country, though nevertheless, in this case, he is finally consigned to damnation.

With Goethe we have a gradual change of attitude towards Faust (towards, that is to say, the philosophical significance of

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Faust) which occurred over a period of almost sixty years. Of the final use which Goethe made of this figure[2] I intend to say more later, but it is as well to mention here that the *Urfaust* (which Goethe wrote about 1773, though it was not published till 1887) is an unambiguous tragedy in which both Faust and Gretchen are doomed to hell, while the *Faust: Ein Fragment* (published in 1790) is essentially the *Urfaust* with the tragic catastrophe omitted, and with a changing but as yet uncrystallized conception of Faust and a more significant kind of Mephistopheles, an emissary (vaguely) of the divine powers. In the definitive play, *Faust, Erster Teil* (published in 1808), of course, Gretchen is received into Heaven as a penitent, Faust is preserved for his adventures in the *Second Part,* and the character of Mephistopheles takes a definite shape.

The point I must make, as emphatically as possible, is that the play under examination is *The First Part of Faust* as it stood after Goethe had made his final alterations, and any reference to earlier versions or conceptions of individual characters is to be made only for the light it will throw on this final version. The theme was one with which Goethe lived the greater part of his creative life, and the kind of significance it had for him varied in the way I have indicated; the sad thing is that critics have spent so much time and labour in the study of the earlier versions that when they come to the culminating *First Part* their approach is vitiated, they deplore that such and such should have been omitted, that such and such should have been added; and the fact that Goethe's literary use of the legend should have changed seems to them a sufficient proof of artistic (or philosophical) uncertainty. But Goethe's creative life was abnormally long, and it is very unreasonable to expect his philosophical opinions to remain consistent throughout, or the works of art in which they play some part to form a consistent whole After all, the changing mind of Goethe is more interesting than the consistency of thought displayed in the work of, say, Schiller. The *First Part* must be judged as a work in its own right; if it is, I think the various anomalies of character and the vacillating intentions which have troubled the commentators, and which they point to as relics of an earlier conception of the play, will very quickly disappear. If the reader confines himself to the printed word on the page in front of him then he will find no valid reason for surprise or dissatisfaction when Faust finally eludes the trap-door into Hell—no, the only possible reason is one not found in the printed word, it lies in an almost obsessional memory of the *Urfaust,* of Marlowe's play, of the 'Volksbuch', or a proleptic knowledge of the *Second Part.* I really think that the person who comes to *Faust* with no

[2]'In the romantic hero the civilized man and the barbarian must be combined; he should be the heir to all civilization, and, nevertheless, he should take life arrogantly and egotistically, as if it were an absolute personal experiment. This singular combination was strikingly exemplified in Dr. Johannes Faustus . . .'
(Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scholarly preconceptions will have the best chance of comprehending what the play is about—which suggests that the neglect experienced by the play in recent years may finally prove to have done it a considerable service.

To return to the *Prologue in Heaven*: it ends with Mephisto, alone, making a little joke:

> Von Zeit zu Zeit seh' ich den Alten gern
> Und hüte mich, mit ihm zu brechen.
> Es ist gar hübsch von einem grossen Herrn,
> So menschlich mit dem Teufel selbst zu sprechen
>
> (I like to see the Ancient from time to time, and I'm careful not to offend him. It is certainly handsome of so great a gentleman to chat so humanly with the devil himself).

The misapprehension under which he labours is already fairly clear; he does not agree with the Lord's description of him as one 'who tempts and excites and must, as devil, create', as an instrument of divine influence, since with the traditional conceit of the Devil he prefers to regard himself as a king in hell rather than as a servant of heaven, as the biblical serpent of Eden, as an individual master-force.

But the one clear fact that emerges from the *Prologue* is this: the drama is to turn on the question of whether man is a *successful* creation, whether the Lord's experiment in crossing the angelic with the animal has produced a form of life which is a useful advance on the emptiness of Chaos. Will Faust (as a representative man) under temptation, and, more than that, during the enactment of evil, still retain his divine acknowledgment of the distinction between good and evil? The issue at stake is *not* whether Faust can resist evil desires—obviously he cannot—but whether he can be brought into absolute and genuine unconsciousness of the moral distinction. We must give due significance to those words of the Lord which I have already quoted,

> Ein guter Mensch in seinem dunkeln Drange
> Ist sich des rechten Weges wohl bewusst.

The aspect of the drama as a *testing* of the Lord's competence as a creator has not been sufficiently noted, perhaps because whereas commentators are ready enough to expound the wager which Mephistopheles makes with Faust, they have generally ignored this disagreement between Mephistopheles and the Lord which results in what is the primal wager, on the flimsy grounds that the *Prologue* is a 'later interpolation' (that is, it was not in the *Urfaust* or the *Fragment* and therefore cannot be of any significance). Mephistopheles is not exactly the Devil, but rather the devil's advocate who resides in every human breast, and his quarrel is not with man, whom he pities as one might pity a badly brought-up child, but with the parent of mankind. One might describe it as the Prometheus theme inverted: for the indignation of this Prometheus is

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shown to be ill-timed and inapposite and, as we shall see, not wholly disinterested. And, if I may be allowed to re-state them, the terms of the wager which is to decide this momentous question are not the simple 'heads or tails' of morality on the one hand and immorality on the other: it is evidence of *non-morality* which will lose the Lord his case, and it is up to Mephistopheles, as the dissenting party, to gather such evidence. The structure and tone of the *Prologue in Heaven,* with the powerful impression it conveys of the invulnerability of Heaven, prepares us for the final victory of the Lord and his vindication as creator. But I do not think that such foreknowledge should detract from the play's interest: it is not a detective novel of the kind whose interest lies solely in the criminal's attempt to evade the law, for the whole point of *Faust* lies in the *way* in which the moral faculty survives and operates in various kinds of experience and under conditions where one might expect it to suffer annihilation. The Devil may think he calls the tune, but Nature 'is a great organ on which our Lord God plays, and the Devil blows the bellows'.[3] Nor is the question as simple as this, because Mephistopheles' powerful cunning and the poor showing Faust makes in their arguments cause the reader's impression of divine omnipotence to fade somewhat. The reader who desires an element of suspense in his drama will not be disappointed after all.

THE FIRST PART OF THE TRAGEDY : FAUST'S CHAMBER.

The *Tragedy* opens in the conventional manner with Faust's soliloquy. Similar in outward appearance to Faustus' soliloquy at the beginning of Marlowe's play, there is however a difference in mental condition between the protagonists of the two plays. Marlowe's Faustus dismisses logic, medicine, law and theology in a remarkably lively and off-hand way, and turns to necromancy as a more exciting and more influential profession: 'a sound magician is a mighty god'. He is a man young in spirit and ambitious, and his taste for magic is 'a toy in blood', an expression of his inner vitality and his suppressed enthusiasm. But the Faust we meet in Goethe's work is an older man,[4] a disillusioned friendless pedant who chooses necromancy for no more positive a reason than the cogency of his dissatisfaction with all orthodox knowledge and the dull cynicism to which it has brought him:

> Mich plagen keine Scrupel noch Zweifel,
> Fürchte mich weder vor Hölle noch Teufel—
> Dafür ist mir auch alle Freud' entrissen
>
> (Neither scruple nor doubt torments me, I fear neither Hell nor the Devil; in return, I have forfeited all joy).

---

[3]Goethe, in conversation, 1815.

[4]Older than his physical age, which internal evidence (he asks if the witch can remove thirty years from his body) would fix at about fifty.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Such a man is clearly an excellent test-case for the dispute between Mephisto and the Lord. The world he knows has disillusioned him and he is ready to enter any apparently more enthralling world, one completely new to him, where, of his previous knowledge and skill and qualities of character, only his innate awareness of where good ends and evil begins will remain to him—or will not.

This soliloquy is a remarkable piece of work: the entire situation is disclosed in one sustained swoop of verse—Faust's dissatisfaction with learning—mere 'Thiergeripp' und Todtenbein', skeletons of animals and bones of the dead—and his desperate turning to magic, the feelings inspired by the Sign of the Macrocosm, and the evocation of the Spirit of the Earth, all occur in about 130 lines. Fundamentally the soliloquy is a finely-illustrated example of 'Wertherism', the genus 'Man of Feeling', with the Wordsworthian distaste for book-learning thrown in—'if Nature will instruct you, the powers of your soul will expand as if one spirit spoke to another'—together with the interesting appearance of a romantic-suffering nostalgia for the moonlight, the twilight sleep of the merciful Luna ('Oh could I but cleanse away the soot of learning and wash myself sound in your dew!'). Yet the expression is restrained, neat even, and good solid phrases and images like 'Thiergeripp' und Todtenbein', and the references to the paraphernalia of a student save this thoroughly romantic and *weltschmerzlich* outburst from the nebulosity which usually attends the expression of such sentiments. Faust is not so completely carried away by the agony of dissatisfaction that he fails to relate his feelings to the scholastic furnishings of his chamber, and by this continuous reference back and forwards he manages to convince us that his longings are sincere and his cynicism has not been arrived at too easily. But that the poetry is successful in this way, and is so moving, does not prove that Goethe's attitude towards its trend of thought is one of simple approval: one is reminded of the remark on Goethe and his *Sturm und Drang* colleagues which Lewes quoted in connection with *Werther*—'He was at once patient and physician, they were patients and nothing else'. I suspect that Goethe's ability to express in cogent verse (and prose) all and any manner of ideas and ideals is a notable reason for the conventional complaint that he was 'no proper thinker', that 'his thoughts upon life were fresh and miscellaneous. They voiced the genius and learning of his age. They did not express a firm personal attitude, radical and unified, and transmissible to other times and persons' (Santayana),[5] or, to quote Eliot's less careful remark, 'it is truer to say that he dabbled in both philosophy and poetry and made no great success of either; his true rôle was that of the man of the world and sage, a La Rochefoucauld, a La Bruyère, a Vauvenargues'.[6] There is more than

[5] *Three Philosophical Poets*; the essay on *Faust* is the most persuasively reasoned piece of Goethe-criticism I have come across, but I strongly disagree with Santayana's main contention: that the play 'glorifies the return from Christianity to paganism. It

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Santayana's 'many insights, half betrayed' in the *First Part* (at any rate): there is a leading, functioning idea, the precipitate which is left in the mind's filter if only we will read the play throughout with reasonable care.

Unlike Shakespeare in other respects, Goethe resembles him in this—he did not work in the modern spirit of singleminded belief or disbelief, he gave all his arts of expression to a number of attitudes, instead of devoting them overwhelmingly to one personal philosophical opinion; in the *First Part,* Goethe 'dabbled in philosophy' in almost the same way as did Shakespeare in (say) ***Measure for Measure,*** and hence the play requires the kind of interpretation which the best critics of the last twenty years have given to the work of Shakespeare. But Goethe has acquired such a reputation for aphorism ('the man of the world and sage')—a reputation which, in one sense of the word, he deserves—that the commentator focusses his attention on the most striking of these wise, pithy sayings and entirely neglects what one might call the 'precipitate' of a given scene or situation. The difference between an *occasional* aphorism (I use the adjective in its literary sense) and the meaning of the totality may be radical; Goethe *thought* in an aphoristic manner, aphorism was part of his poetical style, and we must be careful not to place undue emphasis on these near-proverbs, just as we have learnt to consider such lines as ' 'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, Another thing to fall' and 'More than our brother is our chastity' in their context, to read them as they were written—for the sake of the complete play.

Opening the 'book of secret knowledge from Nostradamus' own hands,' Faust's eyes fall on the Sign of the Macrocosm, which affects him almost as an elixir of youth, and in his newly-found enthusiasm he cries:

> Bin ich ein Gott? Mir wird so licht! . . .
> Jetzt erst erkenn' ich, was der Weise spricht:
> 'Die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen;
> Dein Sinn ist zu, dein Herz ist todt!
> Auf, bade, Schüler, unverdrossen
> Die ird'sche Brust im Morgenroth!'
>
> (Am I a god? It seems so light to me! . . . For the first time I realize what the sage intended: 'The spirit-world is not locked to you; your mind is closed, your heart is dead! Rise, scholar, and eagerly bathe your mortal breast in the Morning Red').

---

shows the spirit of the Renaissance liberating the soul, and bursting the bonds of traditional faith and traditional morals'. To me, the most interesting aspect of the play is the balance it attempts to strike between mediaeval continence on the one hand and Renaissance romantic-expansion on the other.

[6]*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The passage which Faust quotes is clearly enough a eulogy of Illumination, of revealed knowledge as opposed to reasoned, deduced knowledge: it has been suggested (the point is not important) that 'the sage' is Boehmen the mystic, who, like Herder, used the term 'Morgenrot' as a symbol for 'inspiration', the truth which descends on the passive open mind. Goethe may have favoured the intuitive method in his scientific interests, but he had little faith in it in matters pertaining to human life and behaviour, and the dangers of such a sabotage of hard-working reason will emerge unmistakably a little later in the play. For the moment it will be sufficient if we bear in mind that Faust is a character in a play, not the mouthpiece of a philosophical author.

But the Sign of the Macrocosm is 'merely a pageant', and he relapses into disgust until he notices the symbol of the 'Erdgeist', the Spirit of the Earth. His enthusiasm kindles again and with a bombastically heroic gesture he evokes the Spirit. An 'appalling shape' appears, and when Faust has recovered his wits he claims kinship with the Spirit:

> Ich bin's, bin Faust, bin deines Gleichen!
>
> (It is I, Faust, your equal!)

But the Spirit disappears with an enigmatic denial:

> Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst,
> Nicht mir!
>
> (You resemble the Spirit whom you comprehend, not me!).

and Faust is left deflated again. The significance of the 'Erdgeist' is hardly controversial: it is a representation of the abstraction Life, of unformulated disembodied Being—'Birth and the Grave, An eternal Sea, a changeful weaving, an ardent living'—*Life,* as distinct from any man's *life,* which cannot by its nature resemble Life, but only some part of it, some transfigured arrangement, for, as Goethe is reported to have said once, 'Man is the first speech that Nature holds with God'. The Spirit is a symbol of Chaos awaiting divine intervention, whereas man is the result of that intervention and has—as the Lord has said—the relation to God that a plant has to the gardener. Hence Faust cannot say truthfully that he resembles the 'Erdgeist' any more than a man can say that, because he breathes in air, he resembles the wind; if indeed Faust could truly claim kinship with the Spirit, then Mephisto's wager would be won, and the Lord would have been the author of a second Chaos, not of creation.

The fact that in the second version (the *Fragment*) Mephistopheles was the envoy of the 'Erdgeist', who made a second appearance, does not, or should not, concern us; the Spirit is of no outstanding importance in the play as Goethe left it—it serves as evidence of Faust's activities in the Black Art, it administers a warning snub to the philosophical conceit of the magician, and in so doing it clarifies the human position as Goethe saw it.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As a pointed contrast to this awe-inspiring visitation is the entrance of Wagner, the simple untroubled pedant, to listen full of awe and admiration to the Doctor's wisdom; when he leaves, Faust exclaims:

> Wie nur dem Kopf nicht alle Hoffnung schwindet,
> Der immerfort an schalem Zeuge klebt,
> Mit gier'ge Hand nach Schätzen gräbt
> Und froh ist, wenn er Regenwürmer findet!
>
> (He alone can remain in hope who clings tightly to silly trash, who digs greedily for treasure and, finding earth-worms, is filled with joy!).

There is no doubt that Goethe could not approvingly have written such lines: joy is precisely what he would have felt in discovering an earth-worm, it was to him, as scientist and as poet, a treasure indeed. Goethe's attitude to Faust is, as we can already see, less unequivocal than Lessing's probably was: Faust is not saved because his thirst for knowledge and experience is a sign of greatness, but because that thirst never results in drunkenness and because he exhibits greatness of a different kind.

In the resumed soliloquy Faust reverts to his original state of wretched discontent, made worse by the fiasco of the interview with the 'Erdgeist', since he still fails to see that his repudiation by the Spirit is of no significance whatsoever. He bewails the fact that the Spirit has hurled him back 'ins ungewisse Menschenlos', into man's uncertain fate, and he illogically assumes that since he is 'not like the gods', as he somewhat loosely puts it, he must therefore be on a level with the common helpless worm.

While scoffing once more at his 'alt Geräthe', his ancient instruments, his eye lights on a phial of poison and he conceives his third enthusiasm—this time for suicide. The moonlight *motif* recurs:

> Warum wird mir auf einmal lieblich helle,
> Als wenn im nächt'gen Wald uns Mondenglanz umweht?
>
> (Why does it all at once seem to me gloriously light,
> as in the dark wood when moonlight bathes us?).

And after a lengthy description of the glories of death, 'that noble life, that god-like bliss!' he prepares to meet it with a stoical joke —'Here is a juice which quickly makes you drunk'. But his zeal is as unstable and short-lived as ever, and the Easter chimes sway him from his resolve. It is with relief, almost eagerness, that he finds himself dissuaded from the act of suicide, and the rationalization he gives is amusingly naïve: it is not any religious consideration that influences him—'Ring out where men are more pliable'—but the angels' song reminds him of his childhood and the immense significance the Sabbath bells had for him then, and, remembering his past faith, paradoxically enough, 'Die Thräne quillt, die Erde hat mich wieder!' (my tears overflow, Earth possesses me again). The point emerges, I think, that however melancholy Faust's state

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of mind, he does not really wish to kill himself, and, also, that his past beliefs are not entirely past.

BEFORE THE TOWN GATE.

Faust walks with Wagner among the crowds celebrating their Easter holiday. There is here a marked development in the depiction of Faust's character: his opening speech in praise of Spring is not at all what one would expect from the would-be suicide of the previous scene. And whatever his philosophical despair, his interest in the gay scene before him is profound and his feeling for the common people is deeply moving:

> Aus dem hohlen, finstern Thor
> Dringt ein buntes Gewimmel hervor.
> Jeder sonnt sich heute so gern.
> Sie feiern die Auferstehung des Herrn:
> Denn sie sind selber auferstanden;
> Aus niedriger Häuser dumpfen Gemächern,
> Aus Handwerks- und Gewerbesbanden,
> Aus dem Druck und Giebeln und Dächern,
> Aus der Strassen quetschender Enge,
> Aus der Kirchen ehrwürdiger Nacht
> Sind sie Alle ans Licht gebracht . . .
>
> (From the gloomy hollow gate streams out a gay crowd, each one of them eager to sun himself to-day. They are celebrating the Resurrection of the Lord: and they themselves are arisen—from damp rooms in mean dwellings, from the fetters of labour and business, from the oppression of gable and roof, from the cramping confines of the streets, from the churches' solemn night, they are all brought into the light).

The peasants gather to pay homage to Faust, the doctor who risked his life to help them during the Plague, but he waves aside their gratitude—'Bow down to the One above, who teaches us to help and sends us aid'. The crisis of Faust is not that of a young man, of a youth of 'Genius', a revolutionary reformer: it is the crisis of a man who is, in many ways, experienced and wise. And so he is aware that it is a *personal* crisis, and that it is his own problem that must be solved, rather than a world-problem, and consequently he is disinclined to inflict his doubts and troubles upon the simple minds of the peasants. But, still conscious of the limited scope of his knowledge and abilities, their admiration is gall to him, and he says to Wagner:

> Ich habe selbst den Gift an Tausende gegeben;
> Sie welkten hin, ich muss erleben,
> Dass man die frechen Mörder lobt
>
> (I have myself given the poison to thousands; they withered away, and I must live to hear the shameless murderers praised).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But what he is really complaining of, beneath this dissatisfaction with medical science, is the human situation, the nature of man which is imperfect, unfinished and, above all, confined within certain immutable boundaries:

> Was man nicht weiss, das eben brauchte man,
> Und was man weiss, kann man nicht brauchen
>
> (What we do not know is what we need, and what we do know we cannot use).

Faust cannot understand how man's imperfect nature can be visualized in a supernatural setting. To him this human fallibility seems a vast inchoate ugliness serving no purpose, yielding to no ultimate authority; this opinion is shared, very vigorously, by Mephistopheles, that cynical unhelpful Prometheus, though with him it is a contention rather than a discovery. And the Lord's reply to Faust is, again, implicit in the *Prologue in Heaven*—for, as I mentioned previously, this is the kind of drama in which the answers precede the questions and then are proved in action—and it would take this form: 'Man's nature is imperfect, and his abilities and experience are limited, but if his experience of good and his ability to perform good are limited, so also is his imperfection'. We live in an age which vacillates between a desire for the Perfect State and a terrible suspicion that man's imperfections are only too unlimited, and the next few years may well see a renewal of interest in *Faust*, and in Goethe's work generally, because of its cheerful yet impeccable equilibrium, the balance it preserves so confidently between the whirlpool of perfectionism and the rocks of despair.

FAUST'S STUDY (i).

Faust returns home in a more cheerful frame of mind, and remarks how, in one's study, lit by a friendly lamp,

> Man sehnt sich nach des Lebens Bächen,
> Ach! nach des Lebens Quelle hin
>
> (One longs for life's streams, for life's fountainhead).

and we remember the words with which the Lord challenged Mephisto—'Zieh diesen Geist von seinem Urquell ab' (lead this soul away from its fountainhead). Faust is prompted to translate the New Testament into German: 'In the Beginning was the *Word*'—he cannot prize the word so highly, he says; the *Thought*, then? *Might*, perhaps? But no—the *Deed*! 'Im Anfang war die *That*!' And at this point he is near to the fulfilment of his longing for life's fountainhead, since the idea of *Deed*, of activity and achievement, leads directly to the question of what it is right to do, what it is wrong to do.

But at this very moment, with the excellent timing we associate with the Devil, Mephistopheles performs his metamorphosis from poodle into travelling scholar; this is an entirely comic affair, very

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

different from the terrifying evocation of the 'Erdgeist', and in a quibbling manner Mephisto introduces himself as 'Ein Teil von jener Kraft, Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft' (a Part of that Power which ever wills the Evil, and ever does the Good). But this should not suggest that he accepts as valid the opposition, good and evil, which the Lord has laid down. It is simply that he is forced to admit that so far his machinations have tended to effect what the Lord considers good—the fostering of human activity—but Mephisto himself considers an absolute evil, an imposition of arbitrary chaos upon the original Chaos which he loved as his native land; as well, we know the tag about the devil quoting scriptures. Mephisto goes on to describe himself in terms which indicate plainly that this first remark does not signify acquiescence in the Lord's rating of him as an unconscious servant of the divine:

> Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint!
> Und das mit Recht; denn Alles, was entsteht,
> Ist werth, dass es zu Grunde geht
>
> (I am the Spirit who always denies! And rightly so, for everything, that begins to be, is worthy of destruction).

This is actually quite an important detail, since the dissatisfaction with which many critics regard the play is very often bound up with what they call the 'shifting characters' of Mephisto and Faust. With a little care it is easy enough to distinguish between the Lord's idea of Mephisto and Mephisto's idea of himself: the Mephistopheles of the *First Part* emerges as a convincing, if frustrated, power, and Faust as a personality no more illogical than the average human who has avoided mental stultification (we shall find that the *Second Part* calls for standards of judgment which can hardly include consistence of character).

'I am the Spirit who always denies!' And Mephistopheles has a strong case to present. We tend to think of Goethe as splitting up into two distinct personalities—firstly, the author of *Götz* and *Werther*, the exponent of *Weltschmerz* and the poet of Feeling, and secondly, the Wise Privy Councillor, the man who gave Weimar its first fire brigade, who reconciled himself, perhaps a little obtusely, to the seamy side of human life and nature. This notion of a sudden switch from romantic longing to classical health is a most unfortunate travesty; the truth is that in his youth Goethe derived a certain comprehensible pleasure from the technique and outward trappings of Wertherism which, however, quickly gave way to a desire and a search for something more serviceable to the process of living a human life. It is not likely that Goethe ever attained to the degree of serene wisdom for which he longed, but he did believe in looking for it, which may be anathema to the romantic poet, but is very different from that conception of senile complacency which has turned so many intelligent people away from Goethe. You have only to read Mephistopheles' lines with a mind free from such capricious preconceptions to realize that they are no Aunt Sally to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be bowled over by the sunny apophthegms of a Wise Old Man. In fact it is Faust who is the sorry spectacle in this encounter: with his experience of Easter among the crowds fresh in his mind, he defends life fiercely against Mephisto's nihilism—fiercely and (see the conventional idea of the later Goethe) a little obtusely. Mephisto's attitude, by the side of Faust's sudden bout of tub-thumping and the wounded self-pride which produces it, is undeniably 'modest' (though we mustn't sentimentalize him), and his words are dignified for it is not the comic quasi-Autolycus speaking now but, as it were, Saturn complaining against the usurping younger gods, the 'infant thunderer' Jehovah: Faust objects that though Mephisto describes himself as a 'part', he stands before him as a whole, and Mephisto replies:

> Bescheidne Wahrheit sprech' ich dir.
> Wenn sich der Mensch, die kleine Narrenwelt,
> Gewöhnlich für ein Ganzes hält:
> Ich bin ein Theil des Theils, der Anfangs Alles war,
> Ein Theil der Finsterniss, die sich das Licht gebar,
> Das stolze Licht, das nun der Mutter Nacht
> Den alten Rang, den Raum ihr streitig macht.
> Und doch gelingt's ihm nicht, da es, so viel er strebt,
> Verhaftet an den Körpern klebt;
> Von Körpern strömt's, die Körper macht es schön,
> Ein Körper hemmt's auf seinem Gange.
> So, hoff' ich, dauert es nicht lange,
> Und mit den Körpern wird's zu Grunde gehn.
>
> (I merely tell you the modest truth. Though man, microcosm of folly, is pleased to consider himself a whole, I am a part of the part that at first was all, a part of the Darkness which gave birth to Light—arrogant Light, which now disputes with Mother Night her ancient rank and realm. But doesn't succeed, since however hard it strives, it adheres transfixed to bodies; it streams from bodies, makes bodies beautiful, a body hinders it on its course. And so, I hope, it will not last long, but will perish together with the bodies).

But at this point there is a sharp transition from Mephistopheles the overthrown Titan, to Mephisto the squashed devil, the buffoon of Heaven: he cannot leave Faust's study on account of the sign of the pentagram on the threshold, and he may not withdraw through the window because of the law which compels all devils and ghosts to leave by the way they entered. But this is only the dual aspect of Mephisto's nature which we have noticed previously: he is the Prince of Darkness, at moments as eloquent as Milton's Satan; he is also the Prince of bugs and lice, a frustrated clownish demon. But this duality is not to be attributed to bad workmanship on the part of the poet; for what exactly are Mephisto's antecedents and his present position? He is a child of Chaos, and his memories

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Chaos, his idealization of it one might almost say, inspire him with a contempt for mankind which moves us to serious thought and cannot be too lightly dismissed. But Chaos has been superseded and Mephisto is willy-nilly a vassal of the new order and, as the Lord makes clear, his claws have been clipped short though not drawn out. And so, if on occasions he behaves as we would expect of a Prince of Darkness, more often he appears as a cynical sophist or even a buffoon, displaying the kind of malicious wit that is the outcome of a disparity between past glories and present bondage. Yet, though he bewails to Faust the failure with which his plans to exterminate the human race have so far met, he does not fully realize how weak, comparatively, his powers are; were the fact borne in upon him he might no longer be of use to the Lord as a spur goading on the lazy human soul. Hope springs eternal in the devil's breast, too.

FAUST'S STUDY (ii).

Though this scene should be examined in detail, the reader has the consolation that the framework of the play will then be clear to the mind's eye, and the rest of the drama display itself for what it is.

Enter Mephisto, dressed 'als edlen Junker'. However strongly he defended life in the preceding scene, Faust is now once again (though very loquaciously) in the nadir of despair. 'Too old merely to pretend, too young to live without desire', he roundly curses all human experience and life itself, lock, stock and barrel (Mephisto reminds him that he refrained from the 'brown juice'). A 'chorus of spirits' chimes in with the attractive song, 'Weh! weh! Du hast sie zerstört, Die schöne Welt . . .'; commentators disagree as to whether these are 'good spirits' or 'evil', but since angelic voices would hardly be heard referring to Faust as a 'demi-god', I see no reason to doubt their being minions of Mephistopheles; in which case, the 'neuen Lebenslauf', the new course of life, which they exhort Faust to begin is the course of positive evil which seems to them a natural and desirable sequel to his negative rejection and destruction. Their description of the Christian virtues of love, hope, faith and patience, which Faust has damned, as 'die schöne Welt' is surely ironic.

No amount of bad language and un-Christian sentiment on Faust's part is going to win Mephisto's wager for him: he is out to kill Faust's conscience and, as only in action can conscience be proved, so only in action can it be destroyed: 'into the wide world . . .' Mephisto is content to neglect the precise terms of his pact with Faust: his wager is with the Lord and all he requires of Faust is that he should leave his study and begin to *live*—under the auspices of the Devil. But Faust insists that there should be some set arrangement and its conditions are suggested to him by his own hopelessness:

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Werd' ich beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen,
So sei es gleich um mich gethan . . .
Werd' ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
Verweile doch! du bist so schön!
Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen,
Dann will ich gern zu Grunde gehn!
Dann mag die Todtenglocke schallen,
Dann bist du deines Dienstes frei,
Die Uhr mag stehn, die Zeiger fallen,
Es sei die Zeit für mich vorbei!

(If I ever lie contentedly on the bed of sloth, then let my life at once come to an end . . . When I say to the moment—But stay! you are so fair—then you may throw me into chains, then will I willingly perish! Then may the death-bell toll, then are you free from your service, the clock may halt, the fingers fall, and Time for me be past!).

This is highly satisfactory to Mephisto since the conditions are practically identical with the terms of his wager with the Lord. For if Faust cries to the passing moment 'Stay! you are so fair'—and Mephisto intends that these moments shall not be of an edifying nature—then his consciousness of the 'right way' is by implication destroyed.

Faust assures Mephisto that he need not doubt his bond, and that all he asks for is sheer activity:

Du hörest ja, von Freud' ist nicht die Rede . . .
Mit meinem Geist das Höchst' und Tiefste greifen,
Ihr Wohl und Weh auf meinen Busen häufen
Und so mein eigen Selbst zu ihrem Selbst erweitern
Und, wie sie selbst, am End' auch ich zerscheitern

(You hear, there is no question of joy . . . I wish to comprehend in spirit the heights and the depths, heap on my heart all mankind's success and sorrow, absorb into myself all their experience, and in the end, as they do, I shall founder).

Mephisto replies with a wisdom that is in itself by no means devilish:

O glaube mir, der manche tausend Jahre
An dieser harten Speise kaut,
Dass von der Wiege bis zur Bahre
Kein Mensch den alten Sauerteig verdaut!
Glaub' unser Einem, dieses Ganze
Ist nur für einen Gott gemacht;
Er findet sich in einem ew' gen Glanze,
Uns hat er in die Finsterness gebracht,
Und euch taugt einzig Tag und Nacht

(Oh believe me—who for many thousand years have chewed on this hard crust—no man, from cradle to coffin,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> can digest the ancient leaven! Know this one truth—this Whole is made only for a God; he exists in eternal brightness, but us he has brought into darkness, and for you must suffice Day and Night alone).

and he suggests that if Faust really desires such an infinitude of experience he had better associate with a poet, not a devil, since 'Time is short, but Art is long', and when Faust asks him what man is, then, if it is not possible for him to win this 'crown of humanity', Mephisto answers:

> Du bist am Ende—was du bist.
> Setz' dir Perrücken auf von millionen Locken,
> Setz' deinen Fuss auf ellenhohe Socken,
> Du bleibst doch immer, was du bist
>
> (In the end you are—what you are. Though you wear a wig with a million locks, and stockings that raise you a yard off the ground, you will always remain what you are).

This is a warning that we often find, in some form or other, on Goethe's lips: 'Nur das Gesetzt kann uns die Freiheit geben' (only the Law can give us Freedom), as one of his aphorisms (written *as* an aphorism) has it, or to quote a letter to Frau von Stein, 'it is limitation that makes the poet, the artist, the man!' It is what the 'Erdgeist' has implied and the Lord has suggested. Santayana has some interesting remarks on Mephisto's 'equivocal' character, and he says in reference to Mephisto's gibes at Faust's passion for the infinite, 'the soberest truth, when unwelcome, may seem to the sentimental as diabolical as the most cynical lie; so that in spite of the very unequal justness of his various sentiments, Mephistopheles retains his dramatic unity. We recognize his tone and, under whatever mask, we think him a villain and find him delightful'. But we do *not* have to be sentimental in order that Mephisto shall retain his dramatic unity—why *should* he, if he wishes to be logically evil, have to encourage these boundless aspirations? After all, this infinitude of experience which Faust eulogizes in his misery is very different from the infinity of *chaos,* the eternal dark night which Mephisto longs for. And, more important, all these windy aspirations and nostalgias are only too apt to paralyse a man, to inhibit him from action of any kind, and what Mephisto wants from Faust is *action,* and not a lot of harmless romantic twaddle which is more likely to land him in a lunatic asylum than in Hell. But we must be sure to realize that Mephisto shows more than an animus against high-hatted and pretentious ambitions: he extends his contempt to *speculation,* to, in fact, the calm and profitable use of reason and any kind of philosophical intention, and after Faust has left the study he jeers threateningly at him—'Verachte nur Vernunft und Wissenschaft, Des Menschens allerhöchste Kraft . . .' (Just you despise reason and knowledge, mankind's supreme strength).

Those who imagine that the thought-structure of the play is

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

boringly unsubtle should notice how careful Goethe is to suggest this distinction between a useless transcendentalism and an invaluable, human, search for knowledge, based on reason not on self-conceit. When Faust manifests the former, Mephisto attacks it immediately in the hope that he can confuse Faust into abandoning the latter. And this is the secret of the Mephistophelian technique —to castigate some comparatively trivial stupidity and by so doing to cause Faust to react from it violently and fling himself into a more serious evil.

The succeeding conversation which Mephisto, disguised as Faust, holds with a prospective student, is in the same spirit. Much of what he says is undoubtedly true and salutory—his attack on pedantry—but most of what he means is untrue and destructive, and his culminating remark (one of those famous 'sayings of the great'?) must be taken with a grain of salt:

> Gray, dear friend, is all theory,
> And green the golden tree of life.

Faust returns, ready for his journey, and Mephisto promises 'We'll see the little world, and then the great'.

AUERBACH'S CELLAR IN LEIPZIG.

Mephisto has time enough to bring about Faust's damnation, and his mode of operation is not to provoke him into some enormity of evil but to confuse him, deaden his critical faculties and so drown him in the lesser, sensual pleasures and the specious show-pieces of black magic that sooner or later, his romantic aspirations dispelled but replaced by nothing more mature, he will in weary complacency call on the passing moment to remain. The reader must not expect to be led into the haunts of Borgias and Bluebeards. The excitements which Faust asked for Mephisto intends to be of a kind that will bog his mind, a round not of only 'das wilde Leben', wild life, but of 'flache Unbedeutenheit', insipid meaninglessness, as well. This is the reason for the *tour de force* of the magic wine, the drinking songs, and so forth. Faust's only comment throughout is 'I should like to leave'.

THE WITCH'S KITCHEN.

Faust is taken to the Witch's Kitchen to receive the magic potion which is to restore his youth, or, as one might say, the aphrodisiac. It is a further characteristic of the morally unawakened Faust that, though he desires this unnatural rejuvenation, he at the same time objects to the distasteful means to acquire it; when he asks if there is any less repellent method of restoring youth, Mephisto informs him that there is just one other way—to live and work on the land, 'confine yourself and your mind to one narrow round, nourish your body with plain food, live as cattle with the cattle,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and do not be too proud to dung yourself the field you will reap'. The implication that a man has only the bare choice between the kind of life here described and the kind of life the Devil can offer him will not fail to make an impression on Faust's bewildered mind. For, though revolted by the beastly antics of the apes and the witch's hocus-pocus, it has had this effect on him—'Was sagt sie uns für Unsinn vor? Es wird mir gleich der Kopf zerbrechen' (what kind of nonsense is she reciting; my head will split apart directly).

The vision of a beautiful woman which Faust sees in a mirror, and which helps to distract his attention from the gallimaufry of the apes, is pretty clearly not one of Mephisto's effects (not, as H. W. Nevinson suggested, 'an enticement to sensual delight'). The 'ideal woman' and the sentimental yearning she provokes in his breast is inimical to Mephisto's purpose, and the quasi-aphrodisiac is intended to remove difficulties of this kind:

> Du siehst mit diesem Trank im Leibe
> Bald Helenen in jedem Weibe
>
> (With this drink in your stomach you'll soon be seeing a Helen in every woman).

STREET: GRETCHEN PASSING BY.

But at this juncture Mephisto sustains his heaviest defeat just where he expected his greatest victory. Faust meets Gretchen and conceives a passion for her which, to judge from its suddenness and extravagance, is largely a product of the witch's potion: 'By heaven, this child is lovely!' But Gretchen is emphatically not the kind of woman to foster the deadening lechery which Mephisto seeks to promote; a brothel-full of prostitutes would be more to the point, for Gretchen is certainly a better *example* than Faust of the moral sense at work (though, being a simple, illiterate and comparatively untempted creature, she is not such a persuasive *proof*). Gretchen seems to me just 'a good girl', and Mephisto's attack by sexuality is defeated, if partly by her character, mainly by the character of Faust himself.

Apart from Hamlet (who after all is quite an important figure in his play), I do not think any literary creation has been subject to so much half-witted twaddle from the critics as poor Gretchen. Croce's sentimental Gretchen-worship is a ripe case in point: 'the tragedy is the tragedy of Gretchen, not of Faust. The latter is here a rather vulgar being . . .' It is difficult to find a polite explanation of such an inaccurate diagnosis. Faust is admittedly not a masculine equivalent of the simply pure and pious Gretchen, if he were then he would be about as much use to his author as a Hamlet who resembled Ophelia—wrong-headed, yes, but vulgar! The fact is that Croce's conception of *Faust* is wrecked by an attitude towards the drama which, if apparently a healthy reaction against the turgidly 'philosophical' trend of much nineteenth-century Goethe-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

literature, is fundamentally as cynical as Mephisto's anti-romantic tirades. It may be because Croce's *amour propre* as a philosopher is offended by the sight of a poet with metaphysical tendencies that he describes the *Prologue in Heaven,* which seems to me the pivot of the *First Part,* as 'the jest of a great artist, but not more than a jest, quite out of harmony with the drama which follows and which was, in the first period, planned to be serious; a scene in Paradise with the angels, God and the devil, where there is not even an archaic colouring, but a dégagé manner, slightly in the style of Voltaire'. While it is only fair to Croce to bear in mind that he may not have expressed himself so maladroitly in the original, this remark seems to me to win a prize for the largest number of blunders in the smallest space.

I do think, though, that the Gretchen-story weighs a little heavily on the structure of the play, and it is possible that Goethe was somewhat carried away by his interest in this best-selling character. But the episode is, nonetheless, controlled to a functional end, it is part of the drama, if an unwieldy part, and we need not doubt that Faust continues to be the chief character in the play and the wager between Mephisto and the Lord is still the motive.

Mephisto makes a half-hearted attempt to dissuade Faust from pursuing his passion—'Du sprichst ja wie Hans Liederlich, Der begehrt jede liebe Blum' für sich . . .' (you are talking like some old rake-hell who covets every sweet flower)—but he is bound by the compact to serve Faust (as Faust reminds him) and no doubt he would consider Gretchen more promising than the vision of ideal beauty in the mirror.

EVENING: A SMALL CLEAN ROOM.

Faust is taken into Gretchen's room, but instead of the italianate refinements of sensuality which Mephisto had hoped for, Faust's raptures are of a different order, are caused by the idealized vision he conjures up of Gretchen's happy girlhood ('my darling here, with round childish cheeks . . .') and even her bed only inspires the thought of how Gretchen slept there as a baby. Even these respectable raptures are interrupted by an outburst of self-disgust—'away! away! I will never return!' But Mephisto is into his stride by now and, leaving some jewels of dubious origin on the dressing table, he drags off his wavering companion.

STREET.

The preceding episodes in which Mephisto lays siege to Gretchen's virtue call for no comment. In this scene, though, Mephisto lays siege to Faust's virtue, as well: by mocking his feelings of 'ewiger Treu' und Liebe, von einzig überallmächt'gem Triebe' (eternal faith and love, single omnipotent passion) and maliciously implying that under this cloak of fine words lies merely animal lust. Faust is too uncertain of himself to protest effectively: 'I admit you are right, because I must'.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Another amusing example of the Mephistophelian dialectic occurs early in the scene when he tells Faust he must be prepared to testify to the death of Martha's husband; Faust demurs, and Mephisto retorts to the effect that Faust, as doctor of philosophy, talked dogmatically enough about God, the world, and human nature, though if the truth were known he knew as much about them as he knows about this man's death.

GARDEN.

A charming conversation between the lovers (charming, that is, if one forgets Mephistopheles): Gretchen's tale of how she kept the home in order and brought up her baby sister is reminiscent of Lotte in *Werther,* it is the kind of idyllic scene in which, at every period of his life, Goethe found comfort (the motive-power, too, of *Hermann und Dorothea,* the love-story that is nearly all happy-ending). But Goethe's injunction 'Limit yourself' does not mean 'Confine yourself to an idyll', and there is no reason to believe Goethe was quite as *bouleversé* at the sight of Gretchen's domestic economy (which certainly seems to have left her very vulnerable to the crueller aspects of life) as most of his critics seem to have been.

FOREST AND CAVERN.

The translator Thomas Webb points out that in the *Fragment* this scene came after the *Well* scene, thus indicating satiety, whereas in the *First Part* it precedes *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel* (Gretchen's lost innocence) and so indicates *struggle.* We find Faust, alone, somewhat oddly thanking the Spirit of the Earth for granting him all he asked for:

> Gabst mir die herrliche Natur zum Königreich,
> Kraft, sie zu fühlen, zu geniessen'
>
> (you gave me glorious Nature for my kingdom,
> strength to feel it, to enjoy it).

But this can hardly be other than a momentary ecstasy, induced perhaps by the gothic environment of *Wald und Höhle* it is in line with his earlier passing enthusiasms, and even 'der reine Mond, besänftigend', the pure soothing moon, appears again. Mephisto enters to goad Faust out of these passive communings with the kind of cynicism he displayed after the signing of the pact; having in a rather Freudian fashion reduced Faust's bliss to unmentionable origins, he turns his thoughts to Gretchen and routs his better nature by suggesting that since Faust is a devil he might as well behave like one.

Clearly enough, Mephisto is about to bring off Gretchen's seduction, but this is not enough; it may damn Faust as far as Croce is concerned, but not in the eyes of the Lord. The seduction after all is as much Gretchen's responsibility as it is Faust's and to Goethe's practical mind it was the aftermath of the act, its personal

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

repercussion, that was of importance—in this case, the mental condition of the satiated Faust. What Mephisto has to do is to kill the active passion for the girl which has grown in Faust's heart and to reduce her significance to that of a well-patronized prostitute. 'Wilde Leben' may serve to describe the seduction, 'flache Unbedeutenheit' is certainly the aftermath Mephisto desires.

MARTHA'S GARDEN.

Gretchen, now 'fallen', inquires after Faust's religious beliefs; he tries to evade the question by saying he would rob no-one of his faith or church. Gretchen's assumption that he therefore does not believe in God, provokes a wordy equivocating speech of the kind we have come to expect from him: who can say 'I believe in God'? —on the other hand, who can say 'I do not believe in God'?:

> Nenn' es dann, wie du willst,
> Nenn's Glück! Herz! Liebe! Gott!
> Ich habe keinen Namen
> Dafür! Gefühl ist Alles . . .
>
> (Call it what you will, then, call it Bliss! Heart! Love! God! I have no name for it! Feeling is everything . . .).

The contempt for reason is still with him: 'Gefühl ist alles' (which reminds me that I once came across this phrase described as the summit of Goethe's wisdom). 'Nenn's Glück! Herz! Liebe! Gott!' this is not only the abnegation of reason, it is also a repudiation of any kind of value-system, the drowning of essential distinctions in a vast Shelleyan huggermugger. Gretchen's straightforward mind senses the fallacy immediately and connects it unhesitatingly with Faust's companion: Faust's answer is a masterpiece: 'Du hast nun die Antipathie!'.

Mephisto, against growing odds, still does his best to drag the love-affair down to the level of a trivial, sordid adventure: 'You supersensual, sensual wooer, a little girl is leading you by the nose'.

AT THE WELL. NICHE IN THE TOWN WALL.

Two scenes demonstrating Gretchen's swift remorse. The prayer to the Mater Dolorosa—'Ach neige, Du Schmerzenreiche, Dein Antlitz gnädig meiner Noth'—is an especially beautiful piece of verse, an excellent instance of the simple, unadorned, and as it were *etched* Goethean lyric which translators, with their ornate, exclamatory notion of poetry, have found intractable. Just as Ophelia only develops into a really interesting character when she loses her sanity, so Gretchen becomes an impressive and moving figure now that she has lost her innocence.

CATHEDRAL: GRETCHEN AMONG A CONGREGATION.

This, too, is a most impressive section; the service for All Souls and especially for those of Gretchen's mother, poisoned by the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sleeping-draught Faust gave Gretchen, and of Valentine, her brother, murdered in a duel with Faust. It is an evil spirit who whispers her guilt to Gretchen throughout the service—using Mephisto's tactics to smother her soul in remorse, which also is a kind of stagnation in the halted moment—and the trio-form in which the scene is written is very effective: first the Evil Spirit's insidious promptings, 'Are you praying for your mother's soul, that, through you, fell into a long, long sleep of pain'—then Gretchen's distress: 'it is as if the organ robbed me of my breath'—and the choir's 'Dies irae, dies illa'. She faints as the choir chants 'Quid sum miser tunc dicturus . . .'.

WALPURGIS NIGHT: THE HARZ MOUNTAINS.

This—nearly six hundred lines of very ambiguous witches and spirits—is the real thorn in the critic's flesh, as far as the *First Part* is concerned. If the wager is born in mind it will be seen to have some reason for its existence—the necessity with which Mephisto is faced of further bamboozling Faust, turning his brain inside out, and so numbing his faculties with the irrational animal behaviour of the Witches' Sabbath that he will at last abandon his human privilege, the use of reason and the moral sense.

But, I imagine, the prospect of writing a scene which should be purely an irrational *mêlée* of black magic did not please Goethe, and so he produced a composition which is, secondarily, a collection of satirical epigrams. Thus the 'intermezzo', *The Golden Wedding of Oberon and Titania,* consists of a series of epigrams on literary and philosophical figures of the time which was originally written for Schiller's magazine. Mainly of topical interest, few of them reach a high level in the art of the *Xenien,* and the intermezzo may well be left unread.

This not particularly interesting element of satire is present, in diluted fashion, throughout the whole of the Walpurgis Night scene, but it is the aspect of the scene as a stage in the working-out of the wager, as Mephisto at work, which interests us to-day. And in assessing this, we must note what good use Goethe makes of the guttural and hissing sounds, the full-bodied vowels and rich meaty compound-words of the German language; a passage like this, when read with the tongue, sounds like a Brock's Benefit, and it simply cannot be turned into English:

> Das drängt und stösst, das ruscht und klappert!
> Das zischt und quirlt, das zieht und plappert!
> Das leuchtet, sprüht und stinkt und brennt!
> Ein wahres Hexenelement!

In spite of this *tour de force* of noise, Mephisto fails to meet with any notable success: he encourages Faust to dance with a beautiful young witch, but Faust leaves her in a hurry because a small red mouse springs out of her mouth—the mouse serves to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

remind him he is a human being still, not a witch—and because of a vision of Gretchen in chains. This vision, which reassures us that Faust is not too happy about his behaviour in that direction, is inimical to Mephisto who, ironically enough, tries to terrify Faust away from it by telling him that it is witchcraft, it is the Medusa.

GLOOMY DAY : COUNTRY.

Faust discovers that Gretchen is in prison for the murder of her child and in a terrible fury he compels Mephisto to help rescue her: by the conditions of the pact Mephisto must obey Faust even though it means acting against his own interests; however tolerant Goethe may have been towards specific examples of wrong-doing, he proclaims clearly enough that man cannot deny free-will and responsibility. Faust *is* able to dictate a course of action to Mephisto (thus, in the *Second Part,* Mephisto is forced against his will to help Faust reach the 'Mothers'—though, as I hope to show in a later essay, any attempt to counterpoise the two parts of *Faust* is a hazardous undertaking).

One feels—and no doubt one is meant to feel—that Faust's rage against Mephisto is exaggerated and misplaced. As the latter says—'Who was it hurled her into ruin? I or you?' Faust, in that matter too, had the choice of action. But we do believe him sincere when he describes the 'Walpurgis Night' as 'abgeschmackten Zerstreuungen' (tasteless distractions).

DUNGEON.

A memorably poignant handling of that very difficult subject, madness:

> Schön war ich auch, und das war mein Verderben.
> Nah war der Freund, nun ist er weit;
> Zerissen liegt der Kranz, die Blumen zerstreut'
>
> (Fair was I, too, and that was my undoing. Near was my friend, now he is far away; the wreath is torn, the flowers scattered).

Gretchen (no doubt owing something to Ophelia), in her simple apprehension of right and wrong, her clear-cut conventional morality —which, as contrast to Faust's tortured doubts as to the existence of such a dichotomy, is her true dramatic significance—breaks out in an apocalyptic vision of Hell. Knowing she will never find happiness on earth, she refuses to escape: 'Gericht Gottes! Dir hab' ich mich übergeben' (Judgment of God! I surrender myself to you). She dies, and for her the verdict of the puppet play is reversed: not 'Faust, thou art judged; Faust, thou art damned, but, when Mephisto cries 'She is judged!' a voice from above replies 'is saved!'.

* * * *

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And so the *First Part of Faust* ends in a manner admirably calculated to whet the appetite of the least assiduous reader for what is to happen in the *Second Part*. Faust has discovered that scholarship divorced from life is a useless arid thing, that the abnegation of reason symbolized in the *Walpurgisnacht* is finally inimical to human nature, and the terrible end of his love for Gretchen has at least pointed out the way to the 'fountainhead of life', *des Lebens Quelle*. But twenty-four years passed between the appearance of the *First Part* and the posthumous publication of the *Second Part* (Goethe was working on the text right up to his death in 1832), and the erstwhile sharp statement of the *Prologue in Heaven* has become blurred. With the best will in the world one cannot define a simple unity of purpose between the *First Part* and the *Second Part*. The two parts are, nevertheless, not so utterly divorced as is often supposed—but the thread that runs through them is too tenuous to be drawn out and displayed in a concluding sentence. Suffice it here to say that the reader will not find in the *Second Part* exactly that for which the *First Part* whetted his appetite.

D. J. ENRIGHT.

ON THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY[1]

IT seems appropriate to begin a paper of this kind with the simple reminder that works of literature, once they have left their authors' hands, are only kept alive by being recreated and possessed by individuals, and that it is only in terms of their active recreation in the fresh individual context of my experience and your experience that the main function of literature can be defined. In other words, literature is important because it *means* something to you and me and to everyone who is willing to accept its creative discipline; because it takes its place in the developing experience of our lives. It can, of course, serve other interests, such as the one I intend to pursue here—an interest in the meaning of 'culture' and in the relations of culture with economic and social activities; but it can only serve them at all fruitfully when they stem from that vivid personal apprehension and enjoyment that is the basis of all good criticism, as it is the main end of all reading.

It is in the light of these simple truths that we should consider T. S. Eliot's remark about 'sociological criticism, which has to suppress so much of the data, and which is ignorant of so much of

[1]A paper read to the Doughty Society, Downing College, Cambridge.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the rest'.[2] The question is, What *are* the data of 'sociological criticism'? My own answer would be that the relevant evidence is of very varied kinds, but that the primary and indispensable evidence is that offered by literary criticism, by the co-ordinated sensitiveness, powers of analysis, tact and sense of values of the individual playing upon literature itself. Divorced from *taste* sociological criticism becomes the barren exercise it so often is. Taste alone will not of course provide all the evidence—the data—needed for an enquiry of this kind. But it is only a developed feeling for literature, a responsiveness to the varied uses of language, that will tell us *what we are enquiring about*. When we have some idea of that we can usefully pursue our researches outside literature.

What we are enquiring is, in the first place, I suppose, to what extent the interests, perceptions and modes of judgment, embodied in the fresh original creation of a work of art, are fostered and stabilized by day-to-day living in the society within which the artist works.[3] We want to know, therefore, something about such things as these: (i) The nature of the predominate forms of work—of getting a living—in any period, with special emphasis on the varied other-than-economic satisfactions involved; (ii) the forms of personal and wider social relations (beginning with the smaller units of family and neighbourhood), and the relations between different social groups; (iii) the traditions active in different groups and in the nation as a whole—religious, educational, 'cultural', and political traditions, traditions of personal behaviour and responsibility, and so on. We want to know a good many other things too, ranging from what may be called the practical organization of culture (the channels of demand and supply in literature and the other arts, and so on), to the current feeling for Nature and the natural processes. So the programme I have sketched is not one that can be carried out by any one person: it is essentially a matter for co-operative enquiry. But if we are agreed that the culture of a period depends on the kind and quality of the interests and modes of being fostered in ways such as I have indicated, and that these in turn are only present for discussion when the investigator has a sensitiveness to specific values similar in kind to that of the good critic, then we have some hope of making sociological criticism something other than an academic *substitute* for literary criticism, and of making it useful. If you ask me what the use is, I should say that, apart from strengthening our hold on literature that we like, it has the use of all historical and sociological study that is permeated by a sense of human values; that it deepens our insight into the intimate

---

[2] *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, pp. 75-76.

[3] I say 'to what extent' these are fostered in order not to seem to beg too many questions. An original artist may well, of course, reject much of the 'social' experience of his age; but that only means that the relationship is more complicated than when he speaks *for* his age; it is certainly not abolished. And no artist is completely 'original', or completely independent of his time.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dependence of individual growth on factors outside the individual, and makes more vivid and specific the truth that civilization is essentially co-operative, involving co-operation with the living and the dead. In these ways it offers us principles that can guide our thinking about some of the more fundamental problems of the present. Since these are often distorted or obscured in the abstract terms of politics, sociological criticism (as I intend it) has the additional advantage of bringing us back from abstractions to the realities of personal satisfactions and personal fulfilment in certain specific circumstances.

* * * *

After this beginning to a paper with a rather grand title, what I actually have to offer will probably appear extremely slight. I shall be concerned with only a very few of the ways in which it is possible to work out *from* literature—from Metaphysical poetry—to 'the life of the time' in the early seventeenth century; and even within the narrow limits I have chosen I can do little more than suggest what seem to me to be interesting possibilities. Perhaps the demands of a war-time routine will be accepted as an excuse for offering what is little more than a draft programme of work to be done.

I.

The observation to start from is that Metaphysical poetry touches life at many points. I am not referring to subject-matter (though that is varied), but to the range of interest and awareness that is brought to bear on any 'subject'. We come from the poetry with a renewed sense of the multiple nature of man, of the possibility—actualized in the best of the poems—of living simultaneously at many levels. In Donne's love poetry, for example, man—the actual experiencing individual—is felt as intimately enmeshed in the world of sense and instinct; and sense and passion are vividly expressed in their fresh immediacy. But in Donne there is always present the need to become *fully* aware of the immediate emotion, and the effort to apprehend—to grasp and realize—leads inevitably to the quickening of faculties so often only dimly present in the expression of sensation and feeling. In the best of his love poems there is active not only passion or affection but a ranging and enquiring mind and a spirit capable of perceiving values. Conversely, the most ecstatic experience is felt in terms 'which sense may reach and apprehend'. This is only another way of saying that in Donne thought, feeling and bodily sensation are intimately blended. And with this dimension of depth is a dimension of breadth: 'the most heterogeneous ideas' are brought to a focus. The range of Donne's intellectual and worldly interests is a commonplace of criticism; and it is because these interests are so vividly *there*—whether introduced directly or by way of simile and metaphor—that the greater poems of passion seem so solidly grounded.

> And though each spring do add to love new heat,
> As princes do in times of action get

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New taxes, and remit them not in peace,
No winter shall abate the spring's increase.

The triumphant assurance of this—the conclusion of *Love's Growth*—does not depend on any exclusion of the world of which the lovers form a part. Throughout *Songs and Sonnets* the love themes are defined in terms of the poet's interest in an eager, active world of merchants and astronomers, princes and their favourites, schoolboys and prentices:

Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

And besides the range of interests there is also a range of feeling. Thus the love expressed in the greater poems, intensely personal though it is, is not felt simply as an individual personal possession; it is felt in terms of more-than-personal life and growth:

A single violet transplant,
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poor and scant,)
Redoubles still and multiplies.
When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two souls . . .

And yet no greater, but more eminent,
Love by the Spring is grown;
As in the firmament,
Stars by the Sun are not enlarg'd, but shown.
Gentle love deeds, as blossoms on a bough,
From love's awakened root do bud out now.

These examples come from poems containing highly intellectual argument, but they suggest that Donne shares something of the feeling for *natural* growth—as wholesome and right for man—that informs Shakespeare's plays:

For his bounty,
There was no winter in it, an autumn 'twas
That grew the more by reaping.

She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither
And come to deadly use.

Without overlooking the important differences from Donne, we can say something similar of Herbert. Whereas Donne illuminates passion by play of mind, Herbert brings to the expression of his religious experience the familiar world of everyday things. But his homely imagery is not simply a form of expression; it is an index of habitual modes of thought and feeling in which the different aspects and different levels of his personal experience are brought into intimate relation to each other. An additional observation

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is that the stream of his personal experience—more clearly than Donne's—is fed from sources apparently remote in the social topography of the period. His poetry, with its intellectual cast and its tone of courtesy, is plainly the work of one who moves easily in the cultivated circles of his time: 'I know the ways of learning . . . honour . . . pleasure'; and the contemporary learning that he assimilates takes its place in a solid traditional education that respects, without being overawed by, the new science. Thus scientific achievement and a certain complacence in the scientist are focussed simultaneously in the first *Vanity* poem.

> The fleet Astronomer can bore,
> And thred the spheres with his quick-piercing mind:
> He views their stations, walks from door to door,
> Surveys, *as if he had design'd*
> *To make a purchase there*: he sees their dances,
> And knoweth long before
> Both their full-ey'd aspects, and secret glances . . .
>
> The subtle Chymic can devest
> And strip the creature naked, till he finde
> The callow principles within their nest:
> *There he imparts to them his mind,*
> Admitted to their bed-chamber, before
> They appear trim and drest
> To ordinary suitors at the door.

But if Herbert is courtly and Metaphysical he is also popular. He has an instinctive feeling for common speech—pithy, sententious and shrewd, summing up character in a concrete image:

> Then came brave Glory puffing by
> In silks that whistled, who but he?

And as with Donne his interests and the modes of his sensibility are integrated in a uniquely personal idiom.[4]

What I am trying to do is to put into terms more immediately useful for my purpose the familiar conception of the Metaphysicals as possessing 'a mechanism of sensibility that could devour any kind of experience'. The later generation of these poets, apart from Marvell, had not the force of Donne or Herbert, but almost all the poets represented in Professor Grierson's well-known anthology express a vivid play of various interests that are felt as having an intimate bearing on each other: the sensibility is not compartmentalized. That is why the greater poems make such a disturbing, reverberating impact on the mind of the reader, and even the poems that appear slight on a first reading are found to have behind them a range and weight of experience: in almost all there is 'the recogni-

[4]For some discussion of Herbert relevant to the questions in hand perhaps I may refer to my essay on the poet in *Scrutiny*, Summer, 1944 (XII, 3).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience that are possible'.

Now the assumption on which I am working is that a positive distinctive quality common to half-a-dozen good poets and a number of competent and interesting ones, all writing within the same half-century, is not likely to be the result of a purely literary relationship to the founder of the 'school' whose individual genius can be regarded as the sole source of his followers' idiom. It is much more likely that the distinctive note of Metaphysical poetry—the implicit recognition of the many-sidedness of man's nature—is in some ways socially supported; that—to borrow some phrases from a suggestive passage in Yeats's criticism—'unity of being' has some relation to a certain 'unity of culture'. Professor Grierson remarks, 'It was only the force of Donne's personality that could achieve even an approximate harmony of elements so divergent as are united in his love-verses'.[5] When we recognize the truth in this, as we must, we need to keep in mind also the complementary truth tersely expressed by Ben Jonson: 'Rare Poems ask rare friends'.[6]

II.

The tag from Jonson suggests where we should begin our enquiries. We need to know who the Metaphysical poets expected to be interested in their verses, who they met and at what levels, what were the functions, interests and traditions of those who composed their immediate circle. All these questions represent work still to be done. We can say in a general way, however, that the social milieu of the Metaphysical poets was aristocratic in tone, connecting in one direction (partly but certainly not exclusively through patronage) with the inner circles of the Court, in another with the universities and with the middle and upper ranks of the ecclesiastical, administrative and legal hierarchies, and in yet another with the prosperous merchant class represented by Izaak Walton and the Ferrars. A short study of the life of Sir Henry Wotton, a representative member of Donne's circle, may serve to point some provisional conclusions concerning the over-lapping aristocratic groups from which the 'rare friends' were drawn.

Henry Wotton was born in 1568. He came of a Kentish family that had provided the state with soldiers, administrators and diplomats throughout the Tudor period. Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith, from whose admirable *Life* of Wotton I take my information,[7] tells us that, 'High public service, love of learning and of Italy and of poetry, were among the influences inherited from the past' (*Life*

---

[5] *The Poems of John Donne,* Vol. II, Introduction, p. xlvii.

[6] *To Lucy, Countess of Bedford, with M. Donne's Satires.*

[7] *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton,* 2 vols. (Oxford University Press). As well as the text, Appendix III, 'Notes on Sir Henry Wotton's Friends, Correspondents, and Associates', will be found by those who are interested in the interconnections of personal relationships in this period to contain some useful data.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Letters, I, p. 3). Educated at Winchester and Oxford, where he formed a lifelong friendship with John Donne, he went abroad to study law and languages. After five years in the German states, Austria, Italy and Switzerland (where he spent fourteen months in the house of the scholar Casaubon) he returned to England and became one of the secretaries of the Earl of Essex. He accompanied Essex on the Cadiz expedition of 1596 and the Islands Voyage of 1597 (again in company with Donne), and on the disastrous Irish expedition of 1599. There followed a further adventurous period on the Continent, in which he was of service to the future James I, and early in the new reign he was knighted and sent as ambassador to the Venetian Republic. Wotton served three terms as ambassador in Venice, from 1604 to 1610, from 1616 to 1619, and again from 1621 to 1623. Between the first two of these he was engaged in various diplomatic missions, and sat in the Addled Parliament of 1614. For a short period in 1612 he was in disgrace because of some unexpected consequences of his 'definition of an Ambassador': 'An Ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country'. Between the second and the third embassies to Venice Wotton was employed in James I's fruitless negotiations with the Emperor for a European peace. When he finally returned to settle in England in 1623 he was given the Provostship of Eton, and in 1626 he entered deacon's orders. At Eton, with occasional visits to London, Oxford and his old home in Kent, he passed the tranquil remainder of his life, reading, writing, fishing, and taking a lively interest in the boys of the school. In 1638, the year before his death, he was visited by Milton, and in reply to a subsequent letter and a gift copy of *Comus* wrote his well-known commendation of that poem.

Robert Boyle, the famous chemist, who as a boy spent some time directly under Wotton's charge in the Provost's house at Eton, described him as 'a person that was not only a fine gentleman himself, but very well skilled in the art of making others so' (*op. cit.* I, p. 204). To consider Wotton's activities, interests and attainments is to form an idea of the qualities that the age considered proper to a fine gentleman. A large part of Wotton's adult life was spent in the service of the state, and he has of course a place in the political and diplomatic history of the time. But he was far from being merely a public figure. 'A wit and courtier, with the self-possession of a man of action, ready for any adventure and disguise, he was yet by nature and inclination a scholar and student; and beneath his cosmopolitan experience, and the taste and culture of Italy, he had preserved something of the simplicity and piety of the old Wottons, and an untouched devotion to the religion of his country' (*op. cit.* I, p. 27). A scholar and a friend of scholars, he 'was deeply read in history and moral philosophy and civil law'.[8]

[8]He had the thorough grounding in Latin common to men of his class; he spoke Italian perfectly, and knew Greek, French and German.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As a minor poet he is still remembered for his poem on Elizabeth of Bohemia and the *Character of a Happy Life,* written during his period of disgrace in 1612. His prose writings include *The State of Christendom,*[9] a fragmentary *Survey of Education,* and *The Elements of Architecture,* which is said to show the Palladian taste that reached England towards the end of the reign of James I.[10] He was also—to borrow a word from the later seventeenth century, whose tastes he in some ways anticipated—something of a *virtuoso.* He had an amateur interest in the 'superior novelties' of science; he sent to King James a copy of Galileo's *Siderius Nuncius* (1610), which describes the discoveries made through the newly invented telescope—commenting that these would involve some radical changes in judicial astrology; he visited Kepler in 1620 and described the latter's *camera obscura* in a letter to Bacon, remarking, 'I owe your Lordship even by prosmise . . . some trouble this way; I mean by the commerce of philosophical experiments, which surely, of all other, is the most ingenuous traffic' (*Life and Letters,* II, p. 205). He liked to visit the glass factories near Venice, and he collected and sent home from Italy cuttings of flowers and fruit trees. He was also one of the first English connoisseurs of Italian art (*op. cit.* I, pp. 59-60). His will may be cited here as suggesting the variety of his interests. It mentions, besides books, manuscripts and Italian pictures: 'my great Loadstone; and a piece of Amber of both kinds naturally united, and only differing in degree of concoction, which is thought somewhat rare'; 'a piece of Crystal Sexangular (as they all grow) grasping divers several things within it, which I bought among the Rhaetian Alpes, in the very place where it grew'; 'my *Viol di Gamba,* which hath been twice in Italy'; and 'my chest, or Cabinet of Instruments and Engines of all kinds of uses: in the lower box whereof, are some fit to be bequeathed to none but so entire an honest man' as the legatee[11] (*op. cit.* I, pp. 215-219).

What emerges very clearly from Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith's biography is that Wotton's scholarly, artistic and quasi-scientific interests were by no means private hobbies, carefully kept apart from his public interests; they were shared with a large and varied circle of friends, and they permeated his ordinary social living.

---

[9]Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith believes this contemporary survey to be Wotton's.

[10]A remark from this treatise is of some interest in connection with the history of taste. Pointed arches, says Wotton, 'both for the natural imbecility of the sharp angle itself, and likewise for their very uncomliness, ought to be exiled from judicious eyes, and left to their first inventors, the Gothes or Lumbards, amongst other reliques of that barbarous age'. (Quoted in *Life and Letters,* I, p. 196).

[11]According to Walton these were 'Italian Locks, Picklocks, Screws to force open doors, and many other things of worth and rarity, that he had gathered in his foreign Travel'.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Smith describes Wotton's habitual mode of life at Venice:

> 'Being prohibited by his position from any association with the nobles of Venice, he was largely dependent for society on the members of his own household. But these young men, his own nephews, sons of Kentish squires, or scholars fresh from Oxford or Cambridge, formed just the kind of society in which he delighted.[12] Together they made what Wotton called a "domestic college" of young Englishmen in their Venetian palace. They had their chaplain and their religious services; they read aloud the classics, or some new book of weight at stated hours,[13] and dined together, toasting by name their friends in England. They occupied themselves sometimes with music, (the ambassador himself playing on the viol de gamba), sometimes with chemical experiments, or again with philosophical speculations, attempting, as Wotton put it, to mend the world in the speculative part, since they despaired of putting it right in the practical and moral . . . "In summa we live happily, merrily, and honestly", one of his household writes; "let State businesses go as they will, we follow our studies hard and love one another" ' (*op. cit.* I, pp. 57-58).

We do not really know how far upwards in the social scale the kinds of interest that we find in Wotton permeated. James I was bookish, and Charles I was a cultivated man, but it is quite likely that the tone of the inner court circle was set by men whose interests in the arts did not go very far beyond the opportunities for display that they afforded. The fact remains, however, that Wotton's circle was on a comparatively intimate footing with the greater social figures, and that it formed an integral part of the contemporary aristocracy.

In so far as Wotton was representative of a class—and he was certainly not unrepresentative—two points of some importance for our understanding of the seventeenth century emerge. The first is that the aristocracy from whom so many of the friends and patrons of the Metaphysical poets was drawn was a functional aristocracy. The general significance of this was indicated by D. W. Harding in

---

[12]They included Nathaniel Fletcher, a brother of John Fletcher the dramatist, and Rowland Woodward, to whom some of Donne's verse letters are addressed.

[13]In 1620 Wotton wrote to thank Bacon for a gift copy of the *Novum Organum*. 'But of your said work (which came but this week to my hand)', he said, 'I shall find occasion to speak more hereafter; having yet read only the first book thereof, and a few aphorisms of the second. For it is not a banquet that men may superficially taste, and put up the rest in their pockets, but in truth a solid feast, which requireth due mastication. Therefore when I have once myself pursued the whole, I determine to have it read piece by piece at certain hours in my domestic college, as an ancient author' (*op. cit.* II, p. 204).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

two articles in the *Musical Times* (May and June, 1938) on 'The Social Background of Taste in Music':

> 'Common experience suggests that the people who really influence public taste (at the moment chiefly by sanctioning its low level) are those who remain in close touch with industry and commerce and public affairs—what may conveniently be called the upper business class. The leisured are of less account. They or their ancestors were influential while they made their money, but once elevated to the ranks of the leisured they receive deference without possessing influence. They are respected for having secured their translation from the real world, but what they choose to do after metamorphosis is of no moment to those in "active" life. The ideals which make some mark on general opinion are those of men like Lord Nuffield, who, besides being public-spirited, are also responsible industrialists, still in direct touch with business. And at present men of this sort may encourage public interest in the welfare of the unemployed or the usefulness of universities to business life, but they rarely stand effectively committed to a belief in the value of the arts.
>
> 'Presumably (though here the evidence of the historian is required) the older traditions of respecting significant music grew up when the patrons of the arts were people of "practical" importance—rulers, statesmen, ambassadors, men of power in the Church, merchant princes, lords in direct control of their estates. And their taste for music and the other arts was not an idiosyncrasy to be shut away in their private lives: it was an integral part of their public personality. To have had business dealings with them while remaining a confessed philistine must have been like meeting modern business men without knowing anything of golf courses, restaurants, the motor show, air travel, or foreign resorts; possible no doubt, but a trifle embarrassing on both sides'.

The second point, which has a more direct bearing on the particular qualities of Metaphysical poetry, is that in this milieu there was not only 'a current of ideas', but a current fed from varied sources. Consider for a moment Ben Jonson. Jonson wrote masques for the Court and lyric poems that helped to set the tone of much court poetry in Charles's reign. He was a scholar, moving easily in the circle of ideas represented by such men as Camden, Casaubon and Selden. He was also a writer for the popular stage, with an eager interest in the everyday life of London and an ingrained feeling for that native vigour expressed in the colloquial English of his day. Wherever we look we find that the channels of interest form a criss-cross pattern. In Jonson's or Donne's or Wotton's circle, politics and public affairs, scholarship and 'the new philosophy', literature and the arts, meet and cross: they are not compartmentalized. In other words, the milieu offers a variety of interests; it offers a positive incentive to flexibility of mind, and so does something to prepare the ground for that maturity

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of judgment that comes when varied fields of experience are seen in relation to each other.

In another way too Wotton can be instanced as representative. 'Izaak Walton rightly insists', says Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith, 'on the importance of Bocton [the family home in Kent] in the history of Sir Henry Wotton's life. It was indeed the memories and traditions centred about this ancient house that played a predominant part in the formation of his character. From his family and ancestors he inherited that peculiar combination of culture and old-fashioned piety, of worldly wisdom and ingenuousness of nature, "the simplicity", as he called it, "of a plain Kentish man", which gave in after years a certain graceful singularity to his conduct, difficult for the courtiers among whom he moved to understand. He loved everything that savoured of Kent, all the local ways and phrases, and when ambassador abroad he surrounded himself with the sons of Kentish neighbours. Bocton he always regarded as his home, finding even the air about it better and more wholesome than other air; to the end of his life he returned thither when he could, although as a younger son he possessed no claim on the place save that of affection' (*Life and Letters*, I, pp. 3-4). I am very doubtful of Wotton's 'singularity' in this respect. At all events the country house in this period had an importance not merely social but cultural. Few of the greater places can have maintained such a vigorous intellectual life as contemporaries admired at Tew, where Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, gathered his friends and made what Clarendon called 'a University bound in a lesser volume'.[14] But the tradition of 'housekeeping' inherited by a good many noblemen and gentlemen of the early seventeenth century seems to have included the duty of maintaining, in various capacities and for longer or shorter periods, scholars and men of letters. And because the great houses were an integral part of English rural life—not just holiday resorts for hunting and shooting—their owners were genuinely in touch with the activities and traditions of the countryside. Ben Jonson was a shrewd and realistic observer of the life about him, and this is how he described Penshurst, the seat of the Sidney family in Kent:[15]

> The blushing apricot and wooly peach
> Hang on thy walls, that every child may reach.
> And though thy walls be of the country stone,
> They are reared with no man's ruin, no man's groan;
> There's none that dwell about them wish them down,
> But all come in, the farmer and the clown,
> And no one empty handed, to salute

[14]See the extracts from Clarendon's account of Falkland in D. Nichol Smith's *Characters from the Histories and Memoirs of the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 71 ff.; also p. 169 *ibid.*

[15]Owned at the time Jonson wrote of it by Sir Robert Sidney, Viscount Lisle, the younger brother of Sir Philip Sidney.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Thy lord and lady, though they have no suit.
> Some bring a capon, some a rural cake,
> Some nuts, some apples; some that think they make
> The better cheeses bring 'em, or else send
> By their ripe daughters whom they would commend
> This way to husbands, and whose baskets bear
> An emblem of themselves in plum or pear . . .

This is an idealized but not, I think, a misleading picture, and it gives a fair impression of what 'housekeeping' meant for many great families of the time. It meant hospitality, and it meant sharing in the community life of the village in a fairly intimate fashion. It meant something altogether different from a condescending interest in 'the villagers'. In the same poem Jonson tells how King James paid a surprise visit to Penshurst when the mistress of the house was away:

> What great I will not say, but sudden cheer
> Didst thou then make 'em! and what praise was heaped
> On thy good lady then! who therein reaped
> The just reward of her high huswifery;
> To have her linen, plate, and all things nigh
> When she was far, and not a room but dressed
> As if it had expected such a guest.

The 'good lady' who is praised for her 'high huswifery' is Lady Lisle, and it is significant that Jonson can use these homely terms in her praise.[16]

I do not want to idealize the life of the aristocratic households in town and country in which the poets and men of letters had a footing. But it does seem true to say that they were places where a variety of living interests were taken for granted, and where men of different bents and occupations could find some common ground.[17]

---

[16]We are reminded of the description of a sixteenth-century Lady Berkeley, given by John Smyth towards the end of the reign of James I: 'Country huswifery seemed to be an essential part of this lady's constitution; a lady that . . . would betimes in winter and summer mornings make her walks to visit her stable, barns, dayhouse, poultry, swinetroughs and the like; which huswifery her daughter-in-law . . . seeming to decline, and to betake herself to the delights of youth and greatness, she would sometimes to those about her swear, By God's blessed sacrament, this gay girl will beggar my son Henry'. (*The Berkeley Manuscripts*, II, p. 254). See also George Herbert's description of the activities of his mother, Mrs. Magdalen Herbert, included in Edmund Blunden's translation of the Latin verses, *Memoriis Matris Sacra—Essays and Studies of the English Association*, xix, 1933.

[17]It is significant that, according to Walton, when Donne was in the service of Ellesmere, the Lord Chancellor, the latter 'esteemed his company and discourse to be a great ornament' to his own table.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And since the country houses were still functional units in the rural economy of the time,[18] I think they helped to foster that intimate feeling for natural growth and the natural order—something so very different from the modern 'appreciation of nature'—that almost disappears from English poetry after Marvell.

III.

The question of the traditions active in the social groups from which the Metaphysical poets were drawn is far too large for me to venture on any inclusive generalizations. I will only note one or two features of the religious tradition that have a direct bearing on my present theme.

We have recently been reminded that Donne and his generation were the inheritors of the mediaeval view of man that saw him as half way between the beasts and the angels, and as sharing something of the nature of both.[19] Acccording to this view man shares sense and instinct with the animals. But, like the angels, he is capable of intellectual knowledge, though whereas the angels know at once, intuitively, man can only attain knowledge of a limited kind by the exercise of reason. Wretched and worthless through sin, he is capable of salvation through grace. The mediaeval view of man's central place in the universe was undermined by the discoveries and new intellectual currents of the Renaissance. Donne and his contemporaries were forced to question the old assumptions: 'The new philosophy puts all in doubt'. But all the same they were still conscious of the old tradition which sanctioned the view of man as a being existing at many levels—not just a rational being as the eighteenth century tended to see him, not just an economic unit as a powerful trend of thought in the nineteenth century was content to assume. Now 'the idea of man' implicit or explicit in the religious tradition has its own importance. But there is something more important, though more difficult to formulate: I mean the fact that religion in the early seventeenth century is not set over against life; it still in some way *grows out of* the life that it sets itself to foster. George Herbert is close enough to the central Anglican tradition to be instanced as representative. That Herbert's religion is not lacking in elements of imaginative grandeur may be seen from the powerful dramatic play of his poem, *The Sacrifice,* and no one who knows his poems of personal exploration and self-discovery will think of him in terms of a naïve piety. But to understand Herbert

[18]See the early pages of the *Memoirs of the Verney Family during the Seventeenth Century.* In my *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson,* pp. 111-117, I have listed some of the contemporary complaints of the decay of 'housekeeping', which suggest what was still considered its proper function.

[19]See E. M. W. Tillard's *The Elizabethan World Picture,* and Theodore Spencer's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man,* both of which are commented on in a recent review in this journal (Vol. XII, No. 2).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we need to know not only his greater poems—poems that appeal to men of very different faiths—but also his more pedestrian verses where he states very simply the bases of his faith and outlook. There is, for example, *The Church-Porch,* where the precepts of good neighbourliness are tempered and refined by Herbert's personal courtesy and feeling for other people as individuals. And behind this feeling for the direct contact of men in small social units is a pervasive sense of the wider order of nature in which the parish or neighbourhood has its setting and to which it belongs. We see something of this in *Providence*:

> Sheep eat the grass, and dung the ground for more:
> Trees after bearing drop their leaves for soil.

It is the fact that Herbert does not need to insist (for the assumption is that everybody knows) that makes this significant. It is not an accident that in the greater poems of personal experience—in *Vertue. Life* and *The Flower,* for example—the defining is done in terms of imagery drawn from the world of seasonal growth, decay and renewal. The bearing of this aspect of the religious tradition is clear when we consider the implications of the very different idiom of the later seventeenth century. There is no need to question the sincerity of Dryden's religious beliefs, either in *Religio Laici* or *The Hind and the Panther;* but those beliefs—except when they draw on Dryden's powerful conception of social order—seem to have very little to do with his most vital mundane interests.

> Rest then, my soul, from endless anguish freed:
> Nor sciences thy guide, nor sense thy creed.
> Faith is the best insurer of thy bliss;
> The bank above must fail before the venture miss.[20]

A religion that can be expressed in such terms has plainly lost connexion with the deeper sources of vitality and spiritual health; and for this reason it cannot enrich human living with a sense of significance in all its parts as the tradition active in Herbert's—and in Shakespeare's—day enriched it.

IV.

The conditions I have described could not last. In Carew's poem, *In Answer of an Elegiacal Letter, upon the Death of the King of Sweden* . . . (1632), the poet praises the 'halcyon days of Charles I.

> But let us, that in myrtle bowers sit
> Under secure shades, use the benefit
> Of peace and plenty, which the blessed hand
> Of our good king gives this obdurate land;
> Let us of revels sing . . .

[20] *The Hind and the Panther,* Part I, ll. 146-149.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> . . . What though the German drum
> Bellow for freedom and revenge, the noise
> Concerns not us, nor should divert our joys;
> Nor ought the thunder of their carabines
> Drown the sweet airs of our tuned violins.

Even here there is a suggestion of a culture self-conscious and on the defensive. In Marvell the older tradition is still active. But Marvell's greatest poem is concerned with the clash of irreconcilable forces long latent in society.

> Though Justice against Fate complain,
> And plead the ancient rights in vain:
> But those do hold or break
> As Men are strong or weak.
> Nature that hateth emptiness,
> Allows of penetration less:
> And therefore must make room
> Where greater spirits come.

A glance at the background of literature in the period immediately following the mid-century break may serve to bring out by contrast what is meant by saying that Metaphysical poetry touches life at many points, and that its implicit recognition of the many-sidedness of man's nature was socially supported. To start with, of course, the mediaeval traditions—questioned and undermined but still active in Donne's day—do not survive the Civil War. The new intellectual current is rationalist and materialist, pointing forward to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Restoration assumptions concerning man's nature are narrower than those previously accepted. Whereas man had been recognized as a complex being, rooted in instinct, swayed by passions, and at the same time an intellectual and spiritual being, he is now something much simpler. He is a reasonable creature, in the limited way in which the new age understood 'Reason': he is in fact something much more like a mechanism than a mystery; for, says Hobbes, 'What is the Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings; and the Joints but so many Wheels, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer?'[21] Partly in consequence of these changes in the intellectual climate literature tends to stress the rational and social elements in man to the exclusion of other qualities. Dryden is a great poet, but, as I have already suggested, there are wide ranges of human potentiality and human experience that he is quite unaware of.

The changes in social organization were equally marked. At the Restoration the Court was the centre of polite letters. But Charles II's courtiers, though some of them were interested in the

[21]The naked mechanistic attitude was of course qualified in the common acceptance; but that does not destroy Hobbes's representative significance.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Royal Society, were far from being the intellectual centre of a national culture. Wotton would have been sadly out of place at that Court, not only on account of his piety. Cultivated women such as the Countess of Bedford or Mrs. Herbert disappear from the social scene. Country housekeeping in the old sense—though still a factor in the national life—is rapidly giving way before the attractions of a life in town. And what 'the Town' thought of the country is amply demonstrated in the comedies of the period. When one reads Professor Pinto's *Life* of Rochester, probably the most gifted of the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease, one is conscious of a rather chilly wind of emptiness. It is symptomatic that in Rochester, 'wit', canalized into satire, is completely divorced from 'feeling'. And in the best of his love poems the feeling is both simple—a momentary tenderness—and quite unrelated to that fuller life so actively present in Donne's poems even when he is most absorbed by his passion.

* * * *

Those aspects of the background of poetry in the early Stuart period that I have indicated need to be explored in detail before we can reach any certain conclusions about the influence of social life on poetry. And a fuller exploration would certainly make distinctions where I have generalized. (One obvious distinction would be between the first two decades of the seventeenth century, still partly Elizabethan, and the two or three decades that followed, when taste was certainly changing).[22] But it does seem to me that further knowledge of the facts of social life in the first half of the seventeenth century is likely to substantiate the conclusions to which literary criticism points. They are: (i) that the social milieu of the Metaphysical poets was one in which there was an *active* culture: there was 'a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power'; (ii) that through this milieu the poets whose work brings so much of the 'the whole soul of man into activity' touched life at many points. Tradition and the actual social organization alike fostered a range of contacts with contemporary life that is, to say the least, rare in the later history of English poetry.

L. C. KNIGHTS.

[22]David Mathew's *The Jacobean Age* notes some of the shifting currents of taste in the wider social context up to Buckingham's assassination in 1628.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

'THOUGHT' AND EMOTIONAL QUALITY

NOTES IN THE ANALYSIS OF POETRY[1]

WHEN we look at *Heraclitus*[2] we see that the directly emotional and personal insistence distinguishing it is associated with an absence of core or substance: the poem seems to be all emotional comment, the alleged justifying situation, the subject of comment, being represented by loosely evocative generalities, about which the poet feels vaguely if 'intensely' (the 'intensity' of this kind of thing is conditioned by vagueness). Again, the emotion seems to be out there on the page, whereas in reading *Proud Maisie* we never seem to be offered emotions as such; the emotion develops and defines itself as we grasp the dramatic elements the poem does offer—the data it presents (that is the effect) with emotional disinterestedness'. For 'disinterestedness' we can substitute 'impersonality', with which term we introduce a critical topic of the first importance.

Someone may comment that, on the one hand, for Scott, whose poetic impulse clearly came not from any inescapable pang experienced in his immediately personal life, but from an interest in ballads and in the ballad-convention, the impersonality of his poem was an easy achievement, while, on the other hand, absence of impersonality in the handling of poignant emotion needn't be accompanied by the self-cherishing emotionality, the wallowing complaisance, of *Heraclitus*. These matters can be carried further, and the essential distinctions given force, only by close and varied reference to the concrete. Here is a contrast analogous to the last, but a contrast in which the 'impersonal' poem unmistakably derives from a seismic personal experience, while the obviously emotional poem is not suspect, like *Heraclitus*, of being a mere indulgence in the sweets of poignancy:

(a) A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

---

[1]Constituting part of the chapter of a book.
[2]*They told me, Heraclitus.*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(b) Break, break, break,
On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman's boy,
That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break,
At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.

No one can doubt that Wordsworth wrote his poem because of something profoundly and involuntarily suffered—suffered as a personal calamity, but the experience has been so impersonalized that the effect, as much as that of *Proud Maisie,* is one of bare and disinterested presentment. Again, though the working this time doesn't so obviously prompt to a diagrammatic schematization, the emotional power is generated between juxtaposed opposites. It is generated between the two stanzas, or between the states represented by the stanzas: 'she was, she is not'—the statement seems almost as bare and simple as that. But the statement is concrete, and once the reading has been completed the whole poem is seen to be a complex organization, charged with a subtle life. In retrospect the first stanza takes on new significance:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears

—the full force of that 'human' comes out: the conditions of the human situation are inescapable and there is a certain *hubris* in the security of forgetful bliss. Again, the 'human' enhances the ironic force of 'thing' in the next line:

She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

In the second stanza she *is* a thing—a thing that, along with the rocks and stones and trees with which she is

Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,

cannot in reality feel the touch of earthly years and enjoys a real immunity from death. The 'diurnal', chosen apparently for its scientific nakedness and reinforcing as it does that stating bareness with which the diction and tone express the brutal finality of the fact, has actually, at the same time, a potent evocative force: it

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

puts the fact in an astronomical setting and evokes the vast inexorable regularity of the planetary motions, the effect being analogous to that of the enclosing morning-night contrast of *Proud Maisie*.

In *Break, break, break* we again have the poem that offers emotion directly—the poem in which the emotion seems to be 'out there' on the page. If we read the poem aloud the emotion, in full force from the opening, asserts itself in the plangency of tone and movement that is compelled upon us. We do not, however, this time feel moved to a dismissing judgment. The poet is clearly one of distinguished gift, we cannot doubt that behind the poem there is a genuinely personal urgency, and we are not ready to accuse him of being moved primarily by the enjoyment of being poignantly moved —though we *can* very readily imagine a rendering of the poem that should betray too much enjoyment of the poignancy.

And here, in this last suggestion, we glimpse a way of getting beyond a neutrally descriptive account of the differences between the two poems. We can say that Wordsworth's poem is a securer kind of achievement. If someone should comment that to make it a point against a poem that it lends itself more readily to abuse is to assume a great deal, it will perhaps be best not to take up the challenge directly, but to advance another proposition: an emotional *habit* answering to the mode of *Break, break, break* would need to be regarded critically. The poet, we can say, whose habitual mode—whose emotional habit—was represented by that poem would not only be very limited; we should expect to find him noticeably given to certain weaknesses and vices. Further, the reader who cannot see that Tennyson's poem, with all its distinction and refinement, yields a satisfaction inferior in kind to that represented by Wordsworth, cannot securely appreciate the highest poetic achievement at its true worth and is not very likely to be at all strong or sure in the kind of judgment that discriminates between *Break, break, break* and *Heraclitus*.

'Inferior in kind'—by what standards? Here we come to the point at which literary criticism, as it must, enters overtly into questions of emotional hygiene and moral value—more generally (there seems no other adequate phrase) of spiritual health. It seems best not to say anything further by way of immediate answer to the challenge. By the time we have closed the discussion of impersonality, a theme that will come up in explicit form again, a great deal more will have been said to elucidate, both directly and indirectly, the nature of the answer. The immediate business is to push on with the method of exploration by concrete analysis—analysis of judiciously assorted instances.

The pairs of poems that we have examined as yet have presented strong and patent contrasts. It is time to pass on to a comparison where the essential distinction is less obvious:

(a) Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

(b) Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the underworld,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remember'd kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more.

Neither of these poems answers to the description of 'bare presentment'. Both of them look pretty emotional: that is, they make an insistent direct offer of emotion; they incite patently to an immediate 'moved' response. Tackling that most dangerous theme, the irrevocable past, each flows 'from the heart' in swelling and lapsing movements that suggest the poignant luxury of release —the loosing of the reservoirs. At first sight (a), with its banal phrases—'vista of years', 'the insidious mastery of song', 'the heart of me weeps', 'the glamour of childish days', its invocation of music, and the explicit 'I weep like a child for the past' with which it concludes, might seem, if either of the poems is to be discriminated against as sentimental, to be the one. But even at a first reading through of the pair it should be plain that there is a difference of

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

movement between them, and that the movement of (a) is, by contrast, the subtler. Against the simply plangent flow of (b) we feel it as decidedly complex.

When we examine this effect of complexity we find it is associated with the *stating* manner that, in spite of the dangerous emotional swell, distinguishes (a) from (b). And when we examine this effect of statement we find that it goes with a particularity to which (b) offers no counterpart. For the banalities instanced do not represent everything in the poem; the 'vista of years' leads back to something sharply seen—a very specific situation that stands there in its own right; so that we might emend 'stating' into 'constating' in order to describe that effect as of prose-statement (we are inclined to call it—but the situation is vividly realized) which marks the manner. The child is 'sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings' and 'pressing the small poised feet' of its mother—we note that 'poised', not only because of its particularity, but because the word seems to be significant in respect of an essential, though unobtrusive, quality of the poem. The main immediate point, however, is that in all this particularity we have something quite other than banal romantic generality: this is not the common currency of sentimental evocation or anything of the kind. The actuality of the remembered situation is unbeglamouring, becoming more so in the second stanza, with the 'hymns' and the 'tinkling piano'. Something is, we see, held and presented in this poem, and the presenting involves an *attitude towards,* an element of disinterested valuation. For all the swell of emotion the critical mind has its part in the whole; the constatation is at the same time in some measure a placing. That is, sensibility in the poem doesn't work in complete divorce from intelligence; feeling is not divorced from thinking: however the key terms are to be defined, these propositions at any rate have a clear enough meaning in this context.

But to return to the 'tinkling piano': we note that it stands in contrast to the 'great black piano appassionato' of the last stanza, and, along with the 'hymns', to the music that started the emotional flood:

> So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
> With the great black piano appassionato.

We note further that in the ordinary sentimental poeticality inspired by the 'insidious mastery of song' it would not be 'vain': the poet would be swept away on the flood of the immediate, represented by the emotional vagueness into which the 'music' would be translated.[3] It is a remarkable poet who, conveying the 'insidious mastery' and the 'flood' so potently, at the same time fixes and presents with such specificity the situation he sharply distinguishes from the immediate. It is unusual, and suggests lines on which we might explain our finding the 'poised' of the first stanza a word to underscore.

---

[3] *cf.* J. C. Squire's *To a Musician.*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But of course we have passed over a phrase in the second stanza corresponding to the 'vain', and marking a correlated though different distinction—one tensely counterpoised with the other: 'In spite of myself'—

> In spite of myself the insidious mastery of song
> Betrays me back . . .

Here we may profit by a comment on this poem made by D. W. Harding in his *Note on Nostalgia*:[4]

> 'The fact of experiencing the tendency towards regression means nothing. It is the final attitude towards the experience that has to be evaluated, and in literature this attitude may be suggested only very subtly by means of the total context. In *The Grey Land* and in *Piano* the writer's attitude is clear. Shanks obviously finds a tranquil pleasure in the thought of throwing up the sponge. In Lawrence's poem the impulse seems to have been equally strong and is certainly expressed more forcefully, but the attitude is different. Lawrence is adult, stating the overwhelming strength of the impulse but reporting resistance to it and implying that resistance is better than yielding'.

That 'heart of me', we see, is no mere sentimental banality. For the poet his 'heart' is not his; it is an emotional rebellion that he fights against and disowns. *He* is here, and his emotion there. Again the 'glamour of childish days' is a *placing* phrase; it represents a surrender that his 'manhood' is ashamed of.

No more need be said about the elements of this kind in the poem. It is a complex whole, and its distinction, plainly, is bound up with its complexity. This complexity, to recapitulate, involves the presence of something other than directly offered emotion, or mere emotional flow—the presence of something, a specific situation, concretely grasped. The presentment of this situation involves a disinterested or 'constating' attitude, and also a critical attitude towards the emotion evoked by the situation: here we have our licence for saying that, however strong an emotional effect the poem has, that is essentially conditioned by 'thought': the constating, relating and critical mind has its essential part in the work of sensibility. We can say further that the aspect of disinterested 'presentment' is not confined to the situation seen at the end of the 'vista of years'; the collapse upon the 'flood of remembrance' is itself, while so poignantly and inwardly conveyed, presented at the same time from the outside. It is a kind of object for contemplation, though one that isn't 'there' except in so far as we are also inside it. We are immersed in the flood enough to feel, as immediate experience, its irresistibleness; at the same time it is as much 'out there' as the 'child sitting under the piano'. And in these observations we are making notes that are very relevant to the theme of 'impersonality'.

---

[4] *Determinations*, p. 70 (ed. F. R. Leavis).

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Complexity, we can see at once when we pass on, is not a marked characteristic of Tennyson's poem, which is what at the first reading its movement seemed to indicate. It moves simply forward with a sweetly plangent flow, without check, cross-tension or any qualifying element. To give it the reading it asks for is to flow with it, acquiescing in a complete and simple immersion: there it no attitude towards the experience except one of complaisance; we are to be wholly in it and of it. We note, too, the complete absence of anything like the particularity of (a): there is nothing that gives the effect of an object, or substantial independent existence. The particularity of 'the happy Autumn fields', 'the first beam glittering on a sail', and the casement that 'slowly fades a glimmering square', and so on, is only speciously of the kind in question. No new definitions or directions of feeling derive from these suggestions of imagery, which seem to be wholly *of* the current of vague emotion that determines them. We note that the strong effect of particularity produced by (a) is conditioned by the complexity—by the play of contrast and tension; but (b) seems to offer a uniform emotional fluid (though there are several simple ingredients, represented by 'sad', 'fresh', 'strange', 'sweet' and so on—the insistent explicitness of which is significant).

And the relation between 'thought' and 'feeling' as illustrated by Tennyson's poem?—A note of Yeats's on his own work comes to mind here: 'I tried after the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisin* to write of nothing but emotion, and in the simplest language, and now I have had to go through it all, cutting out or altering passages that are sentimental for lack of thought'.[5] This has an obvious bearing on *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*. *Tears, idle tears,* in the main respects dealt with in the last paragraph, may fairly be classed with *Innisfree*. Whether we are to call it 'sentimental' or not it certainly bears to *Break, break, break* a relation that gives force to the suggestion made in regard to this last poem. The poet who wrote the one wrote the other: they are both highly characteristic; and it is plain that habitual indulgence of the kind represented by *Tears, idle tears*—indulgence not accompanied and virtually disowned by a critical placing—would be, on grounds of emotional and spiritual hygiene, something to deplore. There is nothing gross about the poem; it exhibits its author's highly personal distinction; but it unquestionably offers emotion directly, emotion for its own sake without a justifying situation, and, in the comparison, its inferiority to Lawrence's poem compels a largely disparaging commentary.

The comparison is not gratuitous, a puritanic intrusion of critical righteousness; readiness to make the kind of judgment that the comparison enforces is implicit in any sound response to Tennyson's poem. The grounds for this insistence could, if necessary, be demonstrated pretty conclusively from the case—the clinical suggestion applies—of Shelley. Shelley, whose genius is not in

[5] *Early Poems and Stories,* p. v.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dispute, preaches, in the *Defence of Poetry,* a doctrine that makes the writing of poetry as much a matter of passive submission to the emotional tides, and as little a matter of active intelligence, as possible. Consistently with this doctrine, a representative expression of his genius such as the *Ode to the West Wind* depends for its success on our being so carried along in the plangent sweep of emotion that we ask no questions. To the questions that propose themselves when we do stop and consider—Can 'loose clouds' really be 'shed' on the 'stream of the wind' 'like earth's decaying leaves'? What are the 'tangled boughs of heaven and ocean'? and so on—there is no better reply than that the questions don't propose themselves when we are responding properly (as it requires an effort *not* to do). The thinking mind is in abeyance, and discrepancies assume an inevitable congruence in the flood of plangency.

There is, then, an obvious sense in which Shelley's poetry offers feeling divorced from thought—offers it as something opposed to thought. Along with this characteristic goes Shelley's notable inability to *grasp* anything—to present any situation, any observed or imagined actuality, or any experience, as an object existing independently in its own nature and in its own right. Correlatively there is the direct offer of emotion—emotion insistently explicit—in itself, for itself, for its own sake: we find our description merging into criticism. For, reading Shelley's poetry, his best—the finest expression of his genius, there is demonstrable force and point in saying that a due acceptance will have in close attendance on it the at any rate implicit qualification: 'But these habits are dangerous'. It is significant that the example of gross sentimentality examined at the beginning of this chapter[6] was produced by Shelley. And it is not an exceptional lapse. Shelley's works, indeed, provide much more serious occasions for criticism; criticism that is far more damaging because it goes deeper. Here we have the reason for adducing him at this stage of the argument: in the examination of his poetry the literary critic finds himself passing, by inevitable transitions, from describing characteristics to making adverse judgments about emotional quality; and from these to judgments that are pretty directly moral; and so to a kind of discussion in which, by its proper methods and in pursuit of its proper ends, literary criticism becomes the diagnosis of what, looking for an inclusive term, we can only call spiritual malady.

There would be no point in offering here an abridged critique of Shelley in demonstration. To be satisfactory, the treatment must be fairly full, and I have attempted such a treatment in *Revaluation.* But it may still be worth insisting, by way of developing a discussion opened above, that if one finds it a weakness in Shelley's poetry that feeling, as offered in it, depends for its due effect on a virtual abeyance of the thinking mind, one is not appealing, as seems so often to be assumed, to a criterion represented by the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals.

---

[6] *That time is dead for ever, child!*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The possibilities are not as limited as that; the problem cannot be reduced to that choice of simple alternatives which the Shelley-Donne antithesis suggests. And perhaps there is more to be said about the presence of 'thought' in Metaphysical poetry than those who resort so readily to the antithesis recognize. The obvious presence, we know, is in the ratiocination and the use of intellectual material (philosophical, theological and so on). In following the argument and appreciating the nature and relevance of the ideas invoked one has, reading Metaphysical verse, to make something of the kind of sustained intellectual effort demanded by a closely reasoned prose treatise. That, of course, isn't all: in good Metaphysical poetry the analogies that form so large a part of the argument introduce imagery that is concretely realized and has powerful imaginative effects—effects that depend, though, on our following the argument.

The vices to which the Metaphysical habit inclines are antithetical to those attendant on the habit represented by Shelley and the Tennyson of *Tears, idle tears*: they are a matter, not of the cultivation of emotion for its own sake, but of the cultivation of subtlety of thought for its own sake; we find ingenuities of analogy and logic (or quasi-logic) that are uncontrolled by a total imaginative or emotional purpose. And in a great many successful Metaphysical poems the emotion seems to have a secondary and ancillary status: without some *fulcra* of emotional interest the ingenious system of tensions—the organization of 'wit'—couldn't have been contrived; and that says pretty much all there is to say about the presence of emotion. But when a poet of Metaphysical habit is personally moved and possessed by something profoundly experienced, as, for instance, Donne in the *Nocturnall*, then we have poetry of very exceptional emotional strength.

The part of 'thought' in this strength deserves more consideration than it usually gets under the head of 'Metaphysical wit': there is more to it than subtle ratiocination—the surprising play of analogy. The activity of the thinking mind, the energy of intelligence, involved in the Metaphysical habit means that, when the poet *has* urgent personal experience to deal with it is attended to and contemplated—which in turn means some kind of separation, or distinction, between experiencer and experience. 'Their attempts were always analytic'—to analyse your experience you must, while keeping it alive and immediately present as experience, treat it in some sense as an object. That is, an essential part of the strength of good Metaphysical poetry turns out to be of the same order as the strength of all the most satisfying poetry: the conceitedness, the Metaphysicality, is the obtrusive accompaniment of an essential presence of 'thought' such as we have in the best work of all great poets. It can be said in favour of the Metaphysical habit that it favours such a presence.

These points may be enforced by considering, in comparison with a representative piece of Victorian verse, a passage of Marvell:

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(a) Sombre and rich, the skies,
Great glooms, and starry plains;
Gently the night wind sighs;
Else a vast silence reigns.

The splendid silence clings
Around me: and around
The saddest of all Kings,
Crown'd, and again discrown'd.

* * * *

Alone he rides, alone,
The fair and fatal King:
Dark night is all his own,
That strange and solemn thing.

Which are more full of fate:
The stars; or those sad eyes?
Which are more still and great:
Those brows, or the dark skies?

Although his whole heart yearns
In passionate tragedy,
Never was face so stern
With sweet austerity.

Vanquished in life, his death
By beauty made amends:
The passing of his breath
Won his defeated ends.

* * * *

Armour'd he rides, his head
Bare to the stars of doom;
He triumphs now, the dead,
Beholding London's gloom.

Our wearier spirit faints,
Vex'd in the world's employ:
His soul was of the saints;
And art to him was joy.

King tried in fires of woe!
Men hunger for thy grace:
And through the night I go,
Loving thy mournful face.

Yet when the city sleeps,
When all the cries are still,
The stars and heavenly deeps
Work out a perfect will.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(b) What Field of all the Civil Wars,
Where his were not the deepest Scars?
And Hampton shows what part
He had of wiser Art.
Where, twining subtile fears with hope,
He wove a Net of such a scope,
That Charles himself might chase
To Caresbrooks narrow case.
That thence the Royal Actor born
The Tragick Scaffold might adorn:
While round the armed bands
Did clap their bloody hands.
He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable Scene:
But with his keener Eye
The Axes edge did try:
Nor call'd the Gods with vulgar spight
To vindicate his helpless Right,
But bow'd his comely Head,
Down as upon a Bed.

To forestall the possible comment that the comparison is arbitrary, it had better be said at once that Johnson's stanzas are offered as a foil to Marvell's. And, actually, *By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross* may fairly be taken as representative of the tradition, to which it belongs, the main nineteenth-century tradition, and it is highly characteristic for a poet of that tradition to centre his interest in a hero of the past and to exhibit towards him Johnson's kind of attitude. On the other hand, we can say of Marvell that, had he chosen to deal with a figure from the past he would have treated him as a contemporary, and that it is highly characteristic of Marvell to express so sympathetic an attitude towards Charles in a poem of which Cromwell is the official hero.

It must be plain at once that such impressiveness as Johnson's poem has is conditioned by an absence of thought. This is poetry from the 'soul', that nineteenth-century region of specialized poetical experience where nothing has sharp definition and where effects of 'profundity' and 'intensity' depend upon a lulling of the mind. The large evocativeness begins in the first stanza, so that we needn't press the question whether 'clings' in the second—

The splendid silence clings
Around me

—is the right word: we know that if we have lapsed properly into the kind of reading the poem claims such questions don't arise, and that, absorbed in the sombre richness, the great glooms, and so on, we merge without any question at all into the sadness of 'the saddest of all kings'. If we are in a mood to ask questions, the process by which all this evocation is made to invest the 'fair and fatal king' hasn't the needful potency, and reading

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dark night is all his own,
That strange and solemn thing,

we may perhaps comment adversely on the conditions of vague impressiveness in the poem and alcoholic lack of focus in the reader that make 'thing' an impressive rime. How complete an abeyance of the questioning mind is called for becomes still more obvious when the poem itself asks formal questions:

Which are more full of fate:
The stars; or those sad eyes?
Which are more still and great:
Those brows, or the dark skies?

Taken as real questions, requiring answers, they are merely ludicrous. Again, the essential absence of thought—the absence that is essential to the emotional effect—is apparent when (as the right reader doesn't) we try to relate what look like key statements, focussing the significance of the poem. We are told that

The passing of his breath
Won his defeated ends

and then, in the next stanza but one, that

He triumphs now, the dead,
Beholding London's gloom

—nothing more at all seizable is conveyed regarding the nature of his triumph except that he became a legend and a symbol adapted to the purposes of the Lionel Johnsons. And here, of course, we make our critical point: it is his purpose that Johnson is really concerned with, not Charles, who is merely an excuse, a cover, an opportunity. We may note in Marvell's

He nothing common did or mean

an apt implicit comment on the suggested royal triumph of saintly *schadenfreude* that gratifies Johnson, but we know that criticism needn't bother itself with a solemn comparison of Johnson's attitude towards Charles with Marvell's. There is no Charles *there* in Johnson, who is not preoccupied with anything in the nature of an object, felt or imagined as existing in its own right.

Our wearier spirit faints,
Vex'd in the world's employ:
His soul was of the saints;
And art to him was joy.

King, tried in fires of woe!
Men hunger for thy grace:
And through the night I go,
Loving thy mournful face.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

—It is plain that the hunger comes first, the appetite for a certain kind of religiose-emotional indulgence, and that Johnson goes straight for this, uninhibited by any thought of reality—or any thought at all; and that what he loves is his love, his favourite vague and warm emotions and sentiments, which Charles (the thinking and judging mind being in a happy drunken daze) can be taken as justifying. The curious show of thought and logic necessary to Johnson's purpose is well illustrated in the final stanza, with its opening 'Yet'. We can say easily enough what that stanza does, but we cannot say what it means.

It takes no great critical acumen to see all this. The poem is offered for the obviousness of its illustrative significance. It shows in their essential relations vague evocativeness, the absence of anything grasped and presented, the absence of imagery that will bear any closer attention than that given by the rapt and passive mind in its gliding passage, the absence of constating and relating thought, the direct aim at emotion in itself, the grossness of sentimentality. We do not, of course, argue from the poem to Lionel Johnson's personal qualities. It merely shows what an unfortunate tradition can do with a mind of some distinction.

Tradition served Marvell very differently. Though the *Horatian Ode* is not one of his Metaphysical poems, the Metaphysical element perceptible in it goes so perfectly with the actual Horatian mode as to reinforce very neatly a point made above—the point that conceitedness and the other distinctively Metaphysical qualities are, in good Metaphysical poetry, obtrusive manifestations of an essential presence of 'thought' such as we have in some non-Metaphysical poetry. The contemplating, relating and appraising mind is unmistakably there in the characteristic urbane poise of the ode. There could hardly have been a directer or more obviously disinterested concern with objects of contemplation: the attitudes seem to be wholly determined by the nature of what is seen and judged, and the expression of feeling to be secondary and merely incidental to just statement and presentment. These qualities, which are exemplified on so impressive a scale and in so developed a way in the ode as a whole—in the cool appraising poise of the eulogy of Cromwell, the delicately ironic survey of contemporary history, the grave aplomb of the close, and in the very fact of Charles's appearing to such advantage in such a context—are apparent enough in the passage on Charles as it stands by itself. And it is plain that its strength as feeling and attitude, its unassertive command of our sympathy, depends on them.

It may be well to repeat that there is no question here of solemn comparative appraisal of the two poems—or of weighing Johnson's poem against Marvell's fragment. The point of the juxtaposition is that it gives us an illustrative contrast of modes. An antithesis so extreme, some one may comment, as to leave the bearing of the comparison in doubt: it is in the nature of Marvell's ode not to be a product of strong personal emotion (there is no evidence in it that Marvell had any to control), but to be the poised

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

formal expression of statesmanlike wisdom, surveying judicially the contemporary scene. That is so; nevertheless no one will contend that feeling has no part in the effect. Much as the ode seems to be a matter of explicit statement, its judgments are conveyed concretely, in terms of feeling and attitude. In fact, if it were a question of choosing the more potent piece of propaganda for the 'fair and fatal king', the more deeply moving evocation, sympathetic and sympathy-winning, wouldn't even the devotee do well to prefer Marvell's lines? And it should be plain that qualities of essentially the same order as those which justify us in talking of the presence in the *Horatian Ode* of the contemplating, relating and appraising mind can co-exist with the evidence, in tone and feeling, of greater personal urgency—a presence that needn't be at the same time, as it is in the ode, one of very definite and conscious tradition in the attitudes and valuations. Indeed, it would be possible to arrange poems in series in such a way as to make the classification of the *Horatian Ode, Proud Maisie* and *A Slumber did my spirit seal* together, as against the contrasting poems of Lionel Johnson, Tennyson and Shelley, obviously reasonable.

By way of exploring these matters further let us now consider briefly a poem in which Shelley makes what looks like an insistent offer of thought:

> Music, when soft voices die,
> Vibrates in the memory—
> Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
> Live within the sense they quicken.
>
> Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
> Are heap'd for the beloved's bed;
> And so thy thoughts, when Thou art gone,
> Love itself shall slumber on.

The poem has an effect of sharp insistent logic. A series of ostensibly parallel propositions leads up to the 'And so' of the inevitable-sounding conclusion. It is characteristic of the poem that we take the effect without asking whether this 'And so' clinches an analogy or a syllogism. When we do set ourselves resolutely to reading with full and sustained critical attention we find that the effect combines the suggestion of both, and is able to do so only because it is neither, except speciously, by a sleight that depends upon an abeyance of the demand for logic.

> Music, when soft voices die,
> Vibrates in the memory

—that seems merely to state the simple fact that we remember music when it has ceased. The second couplet—

> Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
> Live within the sense they quicken

—seems merely to translate the proposition of the first into terms

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the sense of smell; though we note that the 'live', developed by the equivocal 'quicken' ('make lively'—'impart life to'), reinforces the potential equivocation of 'vibrates'.[7] But when we consider the third couplet—

> Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
> Are heap'd for the beloved's bed

—we find that it is only by a kind of bluff that it has the effect of being another equivalent proposition. The implicit assimilation of the 'rose leaves' to the status of remembered sounds and scents throws back on these (already by suggestion something more than memories) a material reality, or, rather, produces in us a vague sense of a status that combines material reality with non-material persistence: so here they are, the petals, physically impressible by the 'beloved', and yet the clinching effect of the final couplet—

> And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
> Love itself shall slumber on

—involves something more than a clean one-way passage from mere things to mere 'thoughts', and is a completing of the process of legerdemain (for the working of the poem depends on something closely analogous to optical illusion—'the quickness of the hand deceives the eye'). We have in 'thy thoughts' the clinching equivocation: 'thy thoughts' are ostensibly the petals that remain 'when Thou art gone', and this implication of persistence evokes (while we are reading currently) the ghost of a significant force because, without telling ourselves so, or distinguishing between the two senses, we take 'thy thoughts' as being at the same time 'thoughts of Thee'.

What kind of status the bed has that 'Love itself' 'slumbers on' there would be no profit in inquiring, or what kind of being 'Love itself' is or has. The proposition has a metaphysical air, but, clearly, any significance it may claim is merely a ghost. The difference between this kind of effect, which depends on an absence of attention and a relaxing of the mind, and, say, Marvell's *Definition of Love*, which demands a sustained intellectual effort in the following-through and following-up of the thought, needn't be laboured. Exploration may be more profitably pursued through another kind of contrast, that provided by this characteristic poem of Blake's:

> O Rose, thou art sick!
> The invisible worm,
> That flies in the night,
> In the howling storm,
>
> Has found out thy bed
> Of crimson joy;
> And his dark crimson love
> Does thy life destroy.

[7] *cf.* the opening of *Burnt Norton*.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is a commonplace of academic literary commentary that Blake and Shelley are related by peculiar affinities; but what most strikes the reader whose attention is upon the poetry they wrote is their extreme unlikeness. In Blake's best verse there is something corresponding to the 'wiry bounding line' he demanded of visual art. It is not merely that he is strong on the visual side—a truth that lends itself to a misleading overstress. If we are to associate his essential strength with the 'thing seen' it must be in the full consciousness that the phrase here has more than its literal sense. The essential objects in its preoccupation with which his poetry exhibits such purity of interest—such disinterestedness—are not susceptible of visualization; they belong to inner experience, emotional and instinctive life, the inner life of the psyche. It is Blake's genius that, dealing with material that could be present to him only as the most intimate personal experience—the very substance of his appetities, desires, inner urgencies, fears and temptations—he can write poetry that has virtues analogous to those of the 'wiry bounding line'. Its intensity is not one of emotional insistence; there is none of the Shelleyan 'I feel, I suffer, I yearn'; there is no atmosphere of feeling and no I.

In his essay on Blake (one of his finest) Mr. Eliot, discussing the 'peculiar honesty' (or 'unpleasantness') of Blake's poetry, says: 'none of the things which exemplify the sickness of an epoch or a fashion has this quality; only those things which, by some extraordinary labour of simplification, exhibit the essential sickness or strength of the human soul'. Again: *'The Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* and the poems from the Rossetti manuscript, are the poems of a man with a profound interest in human emotions, and a profound knowledge of them. The emotions are presented in an extremely simplified, abstract form'. I quote these remarks by way of enforcing the point that what distinguishes Blake's poetry from Shelley's may fairly be said to be a presence of 'thought'. The seeing elements of our inner experience as clearly defined objects involves, of itself, something we naturally call 'thought'. And it will be noted by the way how inevitably we slip into the visual analogy, the type and model of objectivity being the thing seen (there are bearings here on the visualist fallacy in criticism); and further that there is the significant linguistic usage by which to 'see' is to understand ('I see!'). In any case, the 'extraordinary labour of simplification' behind Blake's best things is a labour of analysis —analysis that he can present in direct statement, as well as implicitly in the resulting 'simplified form'. Again it is convenient to resort to Mr. Eliot's essay:

> 'His philosophy, like his visions, like his insight, like his technique, was his own. And accordingly he was inclined to attach more importance to it than an artist should; this is what makes him eccentric, and makes him inclined to formlessness.
>
> But most through midnight streets I hear
> How the youthful harlot's curse

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse,

is the naked vision;

Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite,

is the naked observation; and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is naked philosophy, presented. But Blake's occasional marriages of poetry and philosophy are not so felicitous'.

By 'direct statement' I mean the kind of thing that Mr. Eliot calls 'the naked observation', and it should be plain that there can be cases where the 'observation' is pretty manifestly present in the 'naked vision'. *The Sick Rose* is surely such a case.

The aspect of 'vision', of course, is the more obvious. We hesitate to call the Rose a symbol, because symbol is apt to imply something very different from the immediacy with which Blake sees, feels and states in terms of his image—the inevitableness with which the Rose presents itself to him as the focus of his 'observation'. We have here a radical habit of Blake's; a habit on which the remark made above regarding objectivity and the thing seen has obvious bearings—and a habit, it might be added, that shows the strength it was to Blake as a poet to be also a visual artist. Yet, after all, how much of Blake's Rose do we cover with 'visual' and 'thing seen'? The vocative establishes the Rose 'out there' before us, so that it belongs to the order of visible things and we don't question that we see it; but does its visual presence amount to much more than that?

'Crimson', of course, makes an undoubted visual impact, but of the total work that it does, in its context, that visual impact is only one element. What 'crimson' does is to heighten and complete the clash of association set up by the first line:

O Rose, thou art sick.

To call a rose 'sick' is to make it at once something more than a thing seen. 'Rose' as developed by 'thy bed of crimson joy' evokes rich passion, sensuality at once glowing, delicate and fragrant, and exquisite health. 'Bed of crimson joy' is voluptuously tactual in suggestion, and, in ways we needn't try and analyse, more than tactual—we feel ourselves 'bedding down' in the Rose, and there is also a suggestion of a secret heart ('found out'), the focus of life, down there at the core of the closely clustered and enclosing petals.

The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

offering its shock of contrast to the warm security of love ('She' is all States, and all Princes, I, Nothing else is') conveys the ungovernable otherness of the dark forces of the psyche when they manifest themselves as disharmonies. The poem, we can see, registers a profound observation of a kind we may find developed in many places in D. H. Lawrence—an observation regarding the possessive and destructive element there may be in 'love'.

There is, then, much more solid ground for attributing 'thought' to this wholly non-ratiocinative and apparently slight poem than to that ostensibly syllogistic, metaphysical piece of Shelley's. And the presence of 'thought' goes with the focussed and pregnant strength, the concentration of significant feeling, that makes the poem so unlike the characteristic Shelleyan lyric. Blake, of course, didn't confine himself to such pregnant brevities as *The Sick Rose*; he aspired to give developed and extended expression to his 'profound interest in human emotions' and his 'profound knowledge of them'. I am thinking of his long poems. Of the long poems Mr. Eliot says that their weakness 'is certainly not that they are too visionary, too remote from the world. It is that Blake did not see enough, became too much occupied with ideas'. Just what such 'ideas' are would be an interesting and fruitful inquiry. It is enough to say here that their weakness as poetry is their weakness as thought. Their generality is of a kind that makes them illusory and inefficacious. They are lacking in grip on the data they are supposed to organize, and they betray a lack of grasp in the poet for such undertakings. Instead of serving as instruments of clarification, they tend to function as a kind of ritual, rote, or game—a game that could have given no satisfaction to the poet if they hadn't blurred the experience they were meant to interpret.

That such strength as is represented by *The Sick Rose* isn't necessarily a matter of the inspired *instantané,* the lyrical flash, but *can* be exhibited in a systematic exploration of experience, Mr. Eliot's own poetry very strikingly testifies. I am thinking above all of the *Four Quartets*. Though the procedure is not one of logical discourse, the labour behind these is as much a labour of thought, and of thought in the same sense, as the labour is that goes to a philosophical treatise. And they owe their virtue as thought, analytic and constructive, to their being distinctly poetic in method: they are essentially and intensely poetic poetry, and can only be understood if their utterly unproselike character is recognized. This unproselike character means the reverse of a relaxed discipline of thought. It is not for nothing that the opening Quartet, *Burnt Norton,* is largely an analysis (by strictly poetic methods—and one can imagine no other by which an analysis so effectively radical could have been conducted) of the nature of conceptual thinking, or of the nature of thought in relation to experience. More generally, it can be said that the essential undertaking of the *Four Quartets* as a whole involves a radical inquiry into the nature of language, the analysis being the indispensable ancillary to construction or re-creation. Dissatisfaction with the relations of thought

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to experience that are imposed by current linguistic usage—by the conceptual currency as it is ordinarily taken over into poetry—forms an explicit corollary of the positive aim.

The examination of T. S. Eliot's later poetry that attempts to enforce these observations is to be found in my *Education and the University*, and I will attempt no summary here: a particular critique of the necessary length hardly fits the scheme of the present book. Yet that poetry represents a case of great immediate relevance. It is quite unlike Donne's, and, when arrived at by the exploratory path we have pursued, it constitutes a more patently clinching and justifying conclusion to the line taken about 'thought' in poetry than a critical expositor could have reasonably hoped to find. For while it is different from Blake's too, the passage to it from Blake's involves, in respect of the present interest and argument, no great jump; there is an easy, obvious and cogent continuity.

A strength patently recognizable as of the same kind as that which led us to speak of the presence of 'thought' in Blake's poetry is there in Eliot's in more developed form, integral with a sustained and complex process, exploratory, analytic and organizing, that is unquestionably thought in the same sense as the thought of the metaphysician. The great difference between the thought of the metaphysical treatise and the thought in *Four Quartets* lies in the genius that enables the poet to refuse with such hardly credible rigour and success the ready-made, the illusory and the spectral, in the way of conceptual apparatus, and to keep his abstractions so fully charged with the concrete of experience and his thinking so unquestionably faithful to it. Such precision and efficiency of thought is possible only to a great poet, and this poetry brings vividly home to us that to think effectively about experience is to think with it and in it (which is why no amount of intellectual drill in itself, however responsive and athletic the trainee, and no mere acquisition, however thorough, of technique, method and apparatus, can generate vital thinking, or are likely to conduce to it).

These, of course, are not new truths, but we realize them with a new force in coming to terms with *Four Quartets*, from which we bring away an enlivened understanding of the nature and conditions of vitality of thought in general. Here, in this poetry of Eliot's, intensely poetic as it is and related, in the ways suggested, to what is strong in other poetry, we have an admirably demonstrative enforcement of the point that the critical discipline capable of justifying formal literary study is a discipline of intelligence, and one that no one who is committed to using language for disciplined thought can afford to forgo.

F. R. LEAVIS.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

The Editors regret that Correspondence from W. Schenk and D. J. Enright has had to be held over till the next number.

HAIL BUTLER !

WILLINGLY TO SCHOOL, by John Newsom (*S.C.M. Press*, 2/6).

The Education Act in practice is proving rather different from the Act on paper, because so much has been left to regulation by the Ministry. This enables new principles to be introduced and sweeping changes to be made without any nonsense about discussion or democracy. It also means that many observers have suffered a change of view as the implications of the Act were clarified by the unfolding of Belgrave Square's purpose. This is, of course, to provide secondary education for all—a phrase which has been acceptable to many, including parents who want their children to 'get on' (*cf.* Mr. Newsom's opening chapter 'Why Education?'), that big-hearted section of the public which distrusts rational processes, and politicians of opposite parties, of whom some expect to win credit with the electorate for their achievement, while others think they have caused their opponents to make considerable concessions.

Among the means to this end are the application of the word secondary to some five or six thousand senior elementary schools, and (to judge by the Ministry's regulations) the liquidation of a thousand or more excrescences in the shape of existing (March 1945) grammar schools. These, with their unfashionable emphasis on quality and their success in some cases in providing as good an education as that available in the best independent schools, would have spoiled the beautiful uniformity, the inspiring equality, of Mr. Butler's plan. Their local character, their enviable freedom and their tiresome individuality must therefore go; and the instrument is the Ministry's regulations, avoiding as they do that scrutiny in Parliament which might have revealed that this freedom has never been abused and that the individuality has never been anything but beneficial from a merely educational viewpoint. Among teachers that crankiness which comes from taking a degree and sometimes leads to putting ideas into pupils' heads will be eradicated as

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more and more teachers are rescued from the softening influence of the universities to be brought up on the manlier regime of the training colleges. Such eccentricities as holiday camps and out-of-school activities will be corrected by short holidays, which will ensure not only that teachers will be indisposed to spend time on such trifles but also that they will have less time to meddle in local and public affairs. Other measures dealing with salaries (*cf.* p. 81 of Mr. Newsom's book), conditions of service, retention of fees in certain schools, and so on, will perpetuate the isolation of the direct-grant and independent schools and preserve them from contamination. Porro unum necessarium: if only Mr. Butler and his Ministry would raise the maximum size of classes in the secondary schools to forty, then indeed they could claim the credit of having achieved parity between the new and the old secondary schools by destroying the grammar school tradition.

About the grammar schools Mr. Newsom has some flattering things to say; they 'have a proud and respected place in English society; they are the cadets of a great tradition and their origins are invested with the patronage of kings. From them have come the doctors, lawyers, administrators, scientists, artists, architects and business executives whose position in the community is generally acclaimed . . .' At best these schools have given the professional classes the education which enables them however specialized to keep ends in sight; at worst they have reached a point (to judge them by the highest standards) from which further advance is possible. They have done nothing to deserve the levelling-down on which the Ministry seems bent—it is not possible to interpret the ministerial fiats in any other way. As this levelling-down takes place, the standards to which the new secondary schools must aspire will be destroyed, and the real equality the case for which is extremely well argued by Mr. Newsom in his chapter on secondary education will never be achieved.

Mr. Newsom's useful and unpretentious book defines some acceptable aims of education, keeps them in mind throughout, and insists on quality. It is much brighter and more interestingly written than the various rather dreary booklets which the Act has inspired; the writer has a closer acquaintance with schools than have many administrators. This 'readableness' is not incidental to its purpose: the enlightenment of a popular audience. As a teacher I would like many parents to read it, because it explains simply and clearly about as much of the nature and purpose of education as the average parent can take in.

DENYS THOMPSON.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SOCIOLOGY AND LITERATURE

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERARY TASTE, by Levin Schücking (*Kegan Paul, 7/6*).

ENGLISH SOCIAL HISTORY, by G. M. Trevelyan (*Longmans, 21/-*).

That 'spirit of the age' doesn't amount to much of an explanation where changes of literary taste are concerned, and that there are sociological lines of inquiry capable of yielding profit—in these suggestions one readily concurs: they are not new, and were not when Dr. Schücking's essay was first published in German, in 1931. And I cannot, after several re-readings, find substantially more to bring away from it. That anyone could write the most casual note relevant to Dr. Schücking's title without proposing any more definite inquiry than he does, or making any more of an attempt to distinguish between possible inquiries, is remarkable. But then, the apparent casualness of his whole procedure is very remarkable. He throws out the most vague of general suggestions and proceeds to demonstrate them with a random assortment of 'evidence' in this way (p. 10):

> 'Elsewhere, with the general understanding less, the conditions were still worse. Chaucer had his Visconti—the unscrupulous John of Gaunt. He ate the bread of a court at which French taste and the rather stale theories of love of past centuries were still accepted; and a good part of his literary activity ran on these lines. They still left room for the play of his sense of grace and elegance, his taste and wit and irony, but not for the real element in his popularity, his wonderful sense of the Thing as It Is, which made him at the end of his life the most vivid portrayer of the Middle Ages. But by then his relations with the court had probably grown far less intimate, and it may be that these descriptions were written for recital to an audience of burghers. Such examples might be multiplied'.

This kind of thing, of course, is not a use of evidence at all, and no amount of it can forward our knowledge or understanding of anything. If you are to conduct a profitable argument about the 'sociological medium of literature' you must have a more inward acquaintance with the works of literature from which you argue than can be got from a literary history or a text-book. There is indeed a most interesting and significant inquiry to be made into the sociological background of Chaucer, but it is of a kind that can hardly fall within Dr. Schücking's ken. It is what, in spite of the reference to 'the philologists', Raleigh suggests here (in one of the extracts from his lecture-notes published posthumously as *On Writing and Writers*—the one worth remembering):

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

'It is impossible to overpraise Chaucer's mastery of language. Here at the beginning, as it is commonly reckoned, of Modern English literature, is a treasury of perfect speech. We can trace his themes, and tell something of the events of his life. But where did he get his style—from which it may be said that English literature has been (in some respects) a long falling away?

What is the ordinary account? I do not wish to cite individual scholars, and there is no need. Take what can be gathered from the ordinary text-books—what are the current ideas? Is not this a fair statement of them?

"English was a despised language used by the upper classes. A certain number of dreary works written chiefly for homiletic purposes or in order to appeal to the humble people, are to be found in the half-century before Chaucer. They are poor and flat and feeble, giving no promise of the new dawn. Then arose the morning star! Chaucer adopted the despised English tongue and set himself to modify it, to shape it, to polish it, to render it fit for his purpose. He imported words from the French; he purified the English of his time from its dross; he shaped it into a fit instrument for his use".

Now I have no doubt that a competent philologist examining the facts could easily show that this account *must be* nonsense, from beginning to end. But even a literary critic can say something certain on the point—perhaps can even give aid by divination to the philologists, and tell them where it will best repay them to ply their pickaxes and spades.

No poet makes his own language. No poet introduces serious or numerous modification into the language that he uses. Some, no doubt, coin words and revive them, like Spenser or Keats in verse, Carlyle or Sir Thomas Browne in prose. But least of all great English poets did Chaucer mould and modify the speech he found. The poets who take liberties with speech are either prophets or eccentrics. From either of these characters Chaucer was far removed. He held fast by communal and social standards for literary speech. He desired to be understood of the people. His English is plain, terse, homely, colloquial English, taken alive out of daily speech. He expresses his ideal again and again . . .

Chaucer has expressed his views on the model literary style so clearly and so often, and has illustrated them so well in his practice, that no mistake is possible. His style is the perfect courtly style; it has all the qualities of ease, directness, simplicity, of the best colloquial English, in short, which Chaucer recognized, three centuries before the French Academy, as the English spoken by cultivated women in society. His "facound", like Virginia's, "is ful womanly and pleyn". He avoids all "counterfeited terms", all subtleties of rhetoric, and addresses himself to the "commune intente".

. . . Now a style like this, and in this perfection, implies a society at the back of it. If we are told that educated people at

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Court of Edward III spoke French and that English was a despised tongue, we could deny it on the evidence of Chaucer alone. His language was shaped by rustics. No English style draws so much as Chaucer's from the communal and colloquial elements of the language. And his poems make it certain that from his youth up he had heard much admirable, witty talk in the English tongue'.

Investigations of the kind suggested could be prosecuted—they are, indeed, likely to be conceived—only by a more sensitively critical reader of English poetry than most scholars show themselves to be, even when they are born to the language. A point that has to be made is that Dr. Schücking's dealings with German literature seem to be no more inward than his dealings with English. He certainly betrays no sense of not being qualified to deal with English, and his confident reference to Thackeray as 'the greatest English novelist of the nineteenth century' (p. 7) is representative. But if the critical quality of his approach to literature can be brought home in a quotation, this is perhaps the one:

'*The deepening of the cleavage between public and art through Naturalism.* The aesthetic movement in Germany was of no great importance. Of more note was the German movement of Naturalism. In Germany naturalism (or realism) came remarkably late. In France its most eminent representative, Emile Zola, had written his most famous novels in the 'seventies; he sought admittance to the Academy in 1888. About the same time (1886) Tennyson indignantly hurled his lame imprecations (now of great historic interest) in *Locksley Hall sixty years after* against the new movement, which had already had in the 'seventies a typical representative in Henry James. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was begun in 1874; Ibsen's *League of Youth* dates from 1869'.

It is bad enough to bracket the Tolstoy of *Anna Karenina* with Zola, as this passage seems to do. But to be capable of referring to Henry James as a 'typical representative' of Naturalism, or a typical representative of anything—what considerable conclusions are compatible with such an approach?

There can be no pleasure in elaborating this kind of commentary. Enough has been said as a preliminary to making the point Dr. Schücking's book provides an opportunity for making—the more suitable an opportunity because of the drive in sociology with which, in its English publication, it is associated. It is an elementary point, but one that seems unlikely to get too much attention as the Sociology of Literature forges ahead: no 'sociology of literature' and no attempt to relate literary studies with sociological will yield much profit unless informed and controlled by a real and intelligent interest—a first-hand critical interest—in literature. That is, no use of literature is of any use unless it is a real use; literature isn't so much material lying there to be turned over

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from the outside, and drawn on for reference and exemplification, by the critically inert.

There are, indeed, many different kinds of possible sociological approach to literature and of literary approach to sociology, but to all of them the axiom just enunciated applies. To Dr. Schücking's offer it most patently applies. You cannot make changes in taste the centre of your inquiry without implicitly undertaking, as an essential part of your work, a great deal of perception, discrimination and analysis such as demand a sensitive, trained and active critic. You can, of course, collect some kinds of relevant material without being, critically, very deeply engaged: there is, for instance, the economic history of literature. (Dr. Schücking, by the way, doesn't mention Beljame's admirable book,[1] nor does he the work of A. S. Collins[2]). But as soon as you start using it in a 'sociological' handling of literature, as, for instance, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, you are committed to being essentially and constantly a critic if your use of the information and of the literature is to amount to anything.

This is so, even if your concern is primarily with the conditions of the literary market—so long, that is, as your concern is with the effect of these on literature. And any serious inquiry into changes of 'taste' (a more complex and less delimitable field of interest than perhaps Dr. Schücking realizes) tends inevitably to develop into a consideration of the most radical ways in which the use of individual talent is conditioned—into the kind of inquiry, for instance, suggested above into the art and language of Chaucer. Everyone interested in literature must have noted a number of in-

---

[1]*Le public et les hommes de lettres au XVIII siècle*, by Alexandre Beljame. Dr. Mannheim would be conferring a service on the world if he published a translation of this book in his new Library. It has been out of print for decades. To bring it up-to-date shouldn't be a very formidable task.

[2]Nor does he appear to know Courthope's *History of English Poetry* or Leslie Stephen's *English Literature and Society in the XVIIIth Century*, both of which are half-a-century old. Leslie Stephen's classic is brief and modest, but in the ready fulness of ordered knowledge and with the ease of a trained and vigorous mind he really *does* something; something as relevant to Dr. Schücking's confused and ambitious gesturings as this suggests: 'Briefly, in talking of literary changes, I shall have, first, to take note of the main intellectual characteristics of the period; and secondly, what changes took place in the audience to which men of letters addressed themselves, and how the gradual extension of the reading class affected the development of the literature addressed to them'. The possibilities of a 'sociology of literary taste' are incomparably better presented by Leslie Stephen's book (written late in life as lectures, which he was too ill to deliver, or to correct for publication) than by Dr. Schücking's inconsequent assortment of loosely thrown out and loosely thought adumbrations.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quiries of that order asking to be undertaken. It is an order of inquiry that, properly undertaken, would pre-eminently justify a 'sociology of literature'; but it could hardly propose itself except to a mind taking the most inward kind of critical interest in the relevant literature. That a German scholar should miss it where Chaucer is concerned is not surprising. That Shakespeare, though Dr. Schücking makes a great deal (relatively) of the Elizabethan theatre as a sociological theme, shouldn't propose it to him brings home more strikingly the disability of an external approach. This suggests fairly enough all the significance he sees (p. 12):

> 'New fields lay open. An infinitely wider sphere of activity showed itself. Literature was written no longer with an eye to the approval of a particular aristocratic patron, who might easily demand, in consequence of his conservative outlook, that traditions should be respected; and the work of the artist was no longer directed by a small and exclusive social group, whose atmosphere was the breath of his life. The artist depended instead indirectly on the box-office receipts, and directly on the theatre managers who ordered plays from him.
>
> 'But in the theatre the works that won applause were precisely those which through their closeness to life and their realistic psychology were bound to be foreign to the taste of the aristocratic world. Thus the shackles of tradition could here be struck off and a wealth of varied talents could find scope'.

What wealth of 'sociological' interest presented by Shakespearean drama and the Elizabethan theatre has been missed here there is no need to insist; this is a field that has had much attention in recent years. Its significance for an understanding of the nature of a national culture and of the conditions of vitality in art will not be quickly exhausted. There are other fields less obviously inviting attention and offering less obvious rewards. There is that marked out by L. C. Knights in the paper printed in the present number of *Scrutiny*—one to which it is very much to be hoped that he will devote a book. If it is asked of such an inquiry whether it is primarily sociological or literary it will be enough to answer that it represents the kind of sociological interest into which a real literary, or critical, interest in literature develops, and that, correlatively, the sociologist here will be a literary critic or nothing.

For to insist that literary criticism is, or should be, a specific discipline of intelligence is not to suggest that a serious interest in literature can confine itself to the kind of intensive local analysis associated with 'practical criticism'—to the scrutiny of the 'words on the page' in their minute relations, their effects of imagery, and so on: a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn; the adjective is not a circumscribing one. On the other hand, a living critical inwardness with literature, and a mind trained in dealing analytically with it, would have improved much work undertaken in fields

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for which these qualifications are not commonly thought of as among the essential ones, if they are thought of as relevant at all. Here is a passage from a distinguished historian—one distinguished among historians for the humane cultivation he brings to his work (he is, moreover, discussing the quality of English civilization in the seventeenth century):

> 'Since thought among common people had now reached a momentary perfection for the purposes of religious and imaginative literature, the English language was for those purposes perfect. Whether in the Bible, the play-book, the street ballad, the broad-sheet or report of the commonest dialogue of daily life, it was always the same language, ignorant of scientific terms, and instinct with a poetical feeling about life that was native to the whole generation of those who used it. Its fault, corresponding to the state of thought in that age, is want of exactness and of complexity in ideas, that renders it unfit for psychology or for close analysis of things either material or spiritual'.

A footnote to this paragraph runs:

> 'If Mill or Darwin, Browning or Mr. Meredith had tried to express their ideas in the English of the seventeenth century they would have failed. The extreme simplicity of Hamlet's thought is only concealed by the obscurity of his motives and the richness of his poetical diction'.

G. M. Trevelyan's *England Under the Stuarts* (which I re-read with gratitude at fairly frequent intervals—the quotation comes from page 54) was written, of course, a good many years ago, and literary fashions since then have changed in ways calculated to help, in respect of the particular point, a similarly cultivated writer who should embark on a similar undertaking. Nevertheless, the passages are sufficiently striking: the appreciation of seventeenth-century civilization that goes with them is clearly a seriously limited one. And one would be agreeably surprised to find a historian who was essentially any better provided with the kind of qualification under discussion.

On the same author's recent *English Social History* I have heard the comment that it is disappointing in that it does little more than add to some economic history that almost every educated person knows some information about English life that any educated person has gathered, and could supplement, from his acquaintance with English literature. Whether this is a fair comment or not (and the book was clearly designed for a given kind of public—it belongs with that higher advertising of England which has employed so many distinguished pens of late), it is certain that a social historian might make a much greater, more profound and more essential use of literature than *English Social History* exemplifies; a use that would help him to direct his inquiries by some sharper definition

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of aims and interests than is represented by Mr. Trevelyan's account of 'social history' in his *Introduction*:

> 'Social history might be defined negatively as the history of a people with the politics left out'.

Positively, we have:

> 'But social history does not merely provide the required link between economic and political history. It has also its own positive value and peculiar concern. Its scope may be defined as the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages: this includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought'.

A social historian who appreciated the nature of the vitality of the English language and of English literature in the seventeenth century—and such appreciation itself leads to sociological inquiries—would, in defining and developing his interests, be sensitized by more positively and potently realized questions than any that have given life, form and significance to *English Social History*: questions as to the conditions of a vigorous and spiritually vital culture, the relations between the sophisticated and the popular, and the criteria by which one might attempt to judge the different phases of a national civilization. To say this is not to envisage with complaisance a habit of naïve comparative valuation. But social history will have shape and significance—will have significant lines and contours—only so far as informed by the life and pressure of such questions; and as intent preoccupations it is towards comparative valuation that they press, even if they actually issue in none that is explicit, definitive and comprehensive. What, as a civilization to live in and be of, did England offer at such and such a time? As we pass from now to then, what light is thrown on human possibilities—on the potentialities and desirabilities of civilized life? In what respects might it have been better to live then than now? What tentative conception of an ideal civilization are we prompted towards by the hints we gather from history? It is with such questions in mind—which is not to say that he will come out with answers to them—that a social historian, in so far as his history is anything more than an assemblage of mechanically arranged external information, must define the changes and developments that he discerns. Some such questions were no doubt in Mr. Trevelyan's mind. But they hadn't a sufficient concrete charge; they were not sufficiently informed with that kind of appreciation of the higher possibilities of a civilization which, in the earlier book, would have made it impossible for him to pronounce that the English of the seventeenth century was inadequate to the complexities and subtleties of Brown-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing and Meredith, or to suggest that one has disposed of the language of Shakespeare in saying that 'the extreme simplicity of Hamlet's thought is only concealed by the obscurity of his motives and the richness of his poetical diction'.

Mr. Trevelyan, as I have said, is distinguished among historians by his general culture. But his use of literature is nowhere more than external (see, *e.g.* his use of Chaucer in *England in the Age of Wycliffe*): he knows that literature exists—it nowhere amounts to evidence of much more than that. The possible uses of literature to the historian and the sociologist are many in kind, and all the important ones demand that the user shall be able, in the fullest sense, to read. If, for instance, we want to go further than the mere constatation that a century-and-a-half ago the family counted for much more than it does now, if we want some notion of the difference involved in day-to-day living—in the sense of life and its dimensions and in its emotional and moral accenting—for the ordinary cultivated person, we may profitably start trying to form it from the novels of Jane Austen. But only if we are capable of appreciating shade, tone, implication and essential structure—as (it is necessary to add) none of the academically, or fashionably, accredited authorities seems to be.

On the other hand, the understanding of literature stands to gain much from sociological interests and a knowledge of social history. And this is an opportunity to mention, for illustration, Mr. Yvor Winters' *Maule's Curse*,[3] a book that should have been reviewed in these pages, seeing how few good books of literary criticism appear. In it Mr. Winters, by relating the key American authors with the New England background and the heritage of Puritanism, throws a truly revealing light on their work and on the evolution of American literature. Perhaps it may be possible to revert more adequately to the book in a later number of *Scrutiny*.

F. R. LEAVIS.

[3]New Directions: Norfolk, Conn., 1938.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED